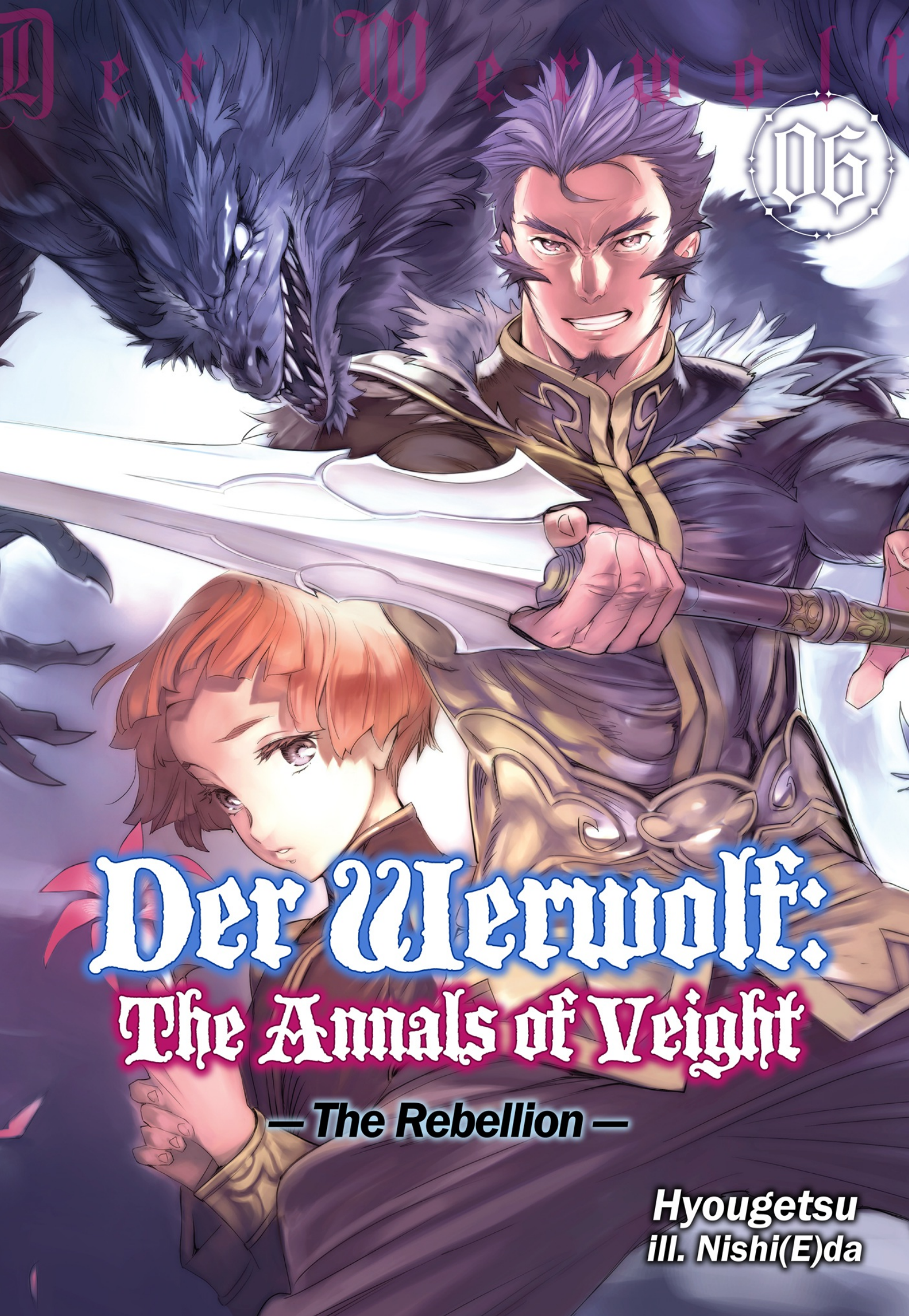




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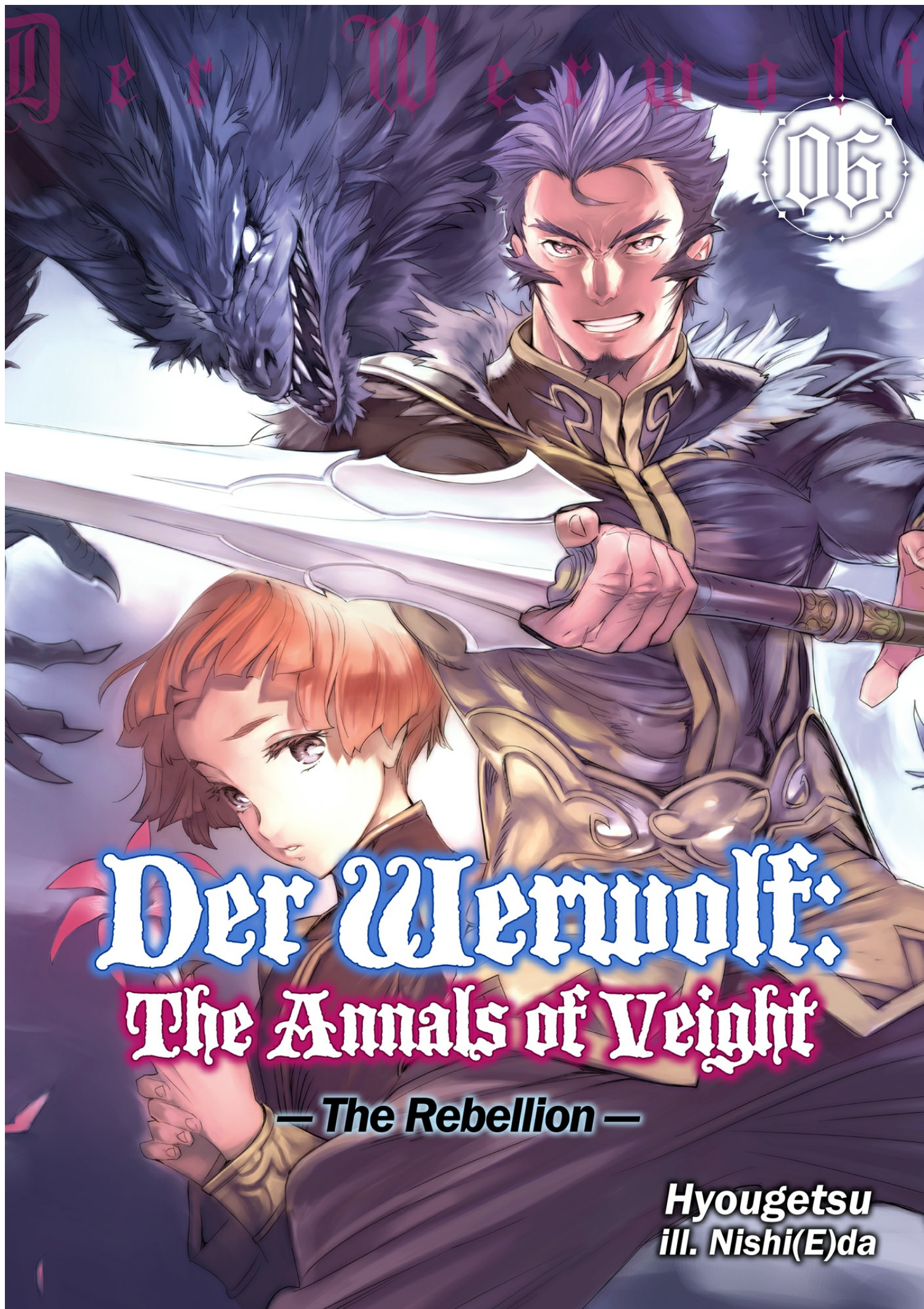
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— The Rebellion —

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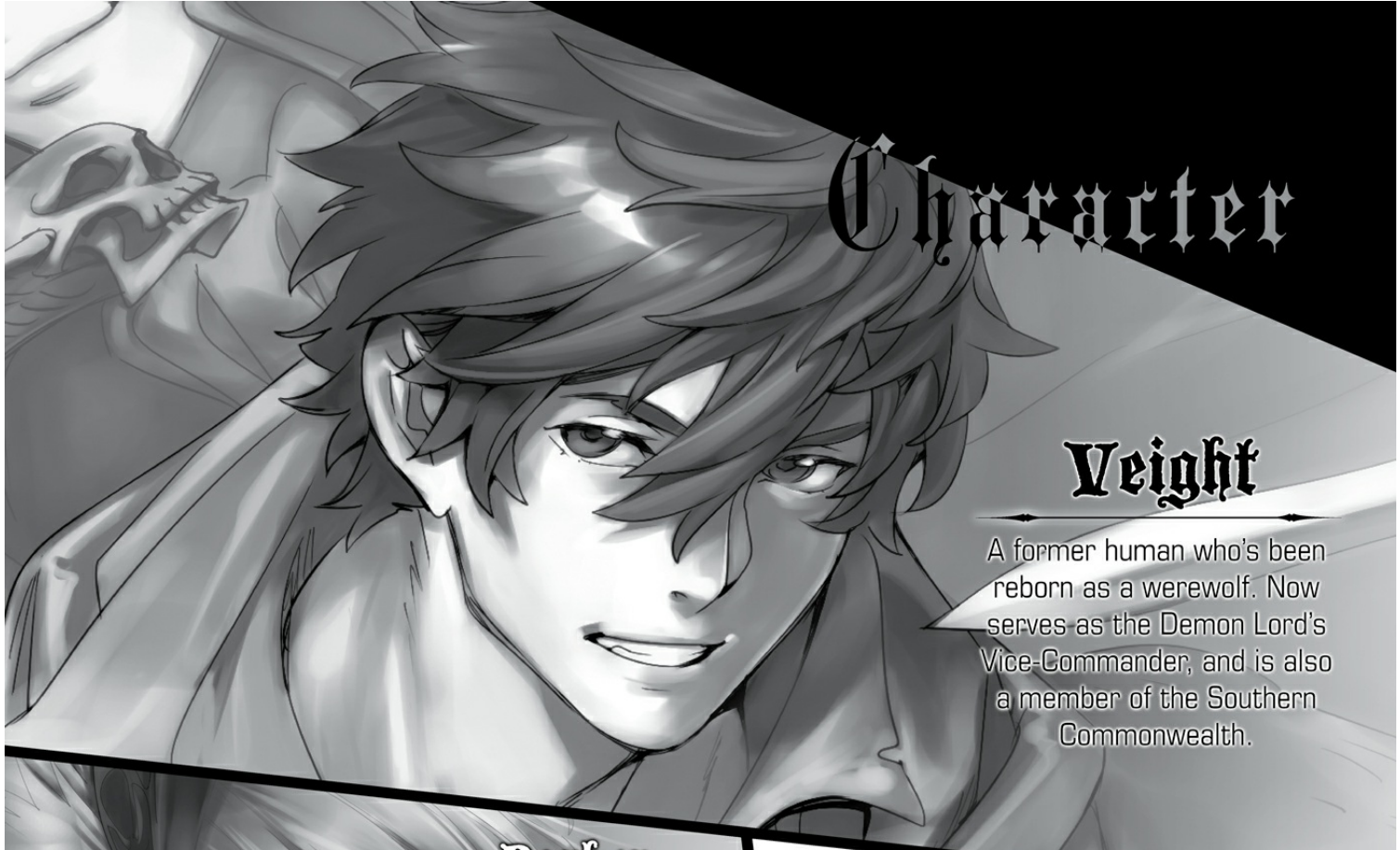
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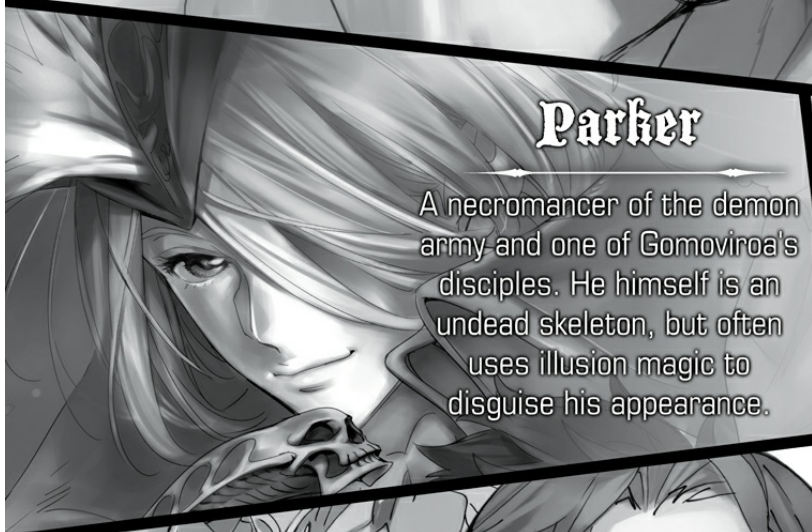




Character

Veight

A former human who's been reborn as a werewolf. Now serves as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, and is also a member of the Southern Commonwealth.



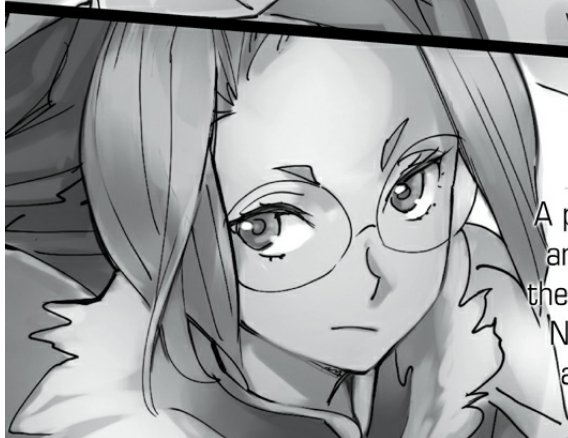
Parker

A necromancer of the demon army and one of Gomoviroa's disciples. He himself is an undead skeleton, but often uses illusion magic to disguise his appearance.



Rite

Originally worked for the Senate, but after meeting with Veight became his Vice-Commander. A master of epoch magic.



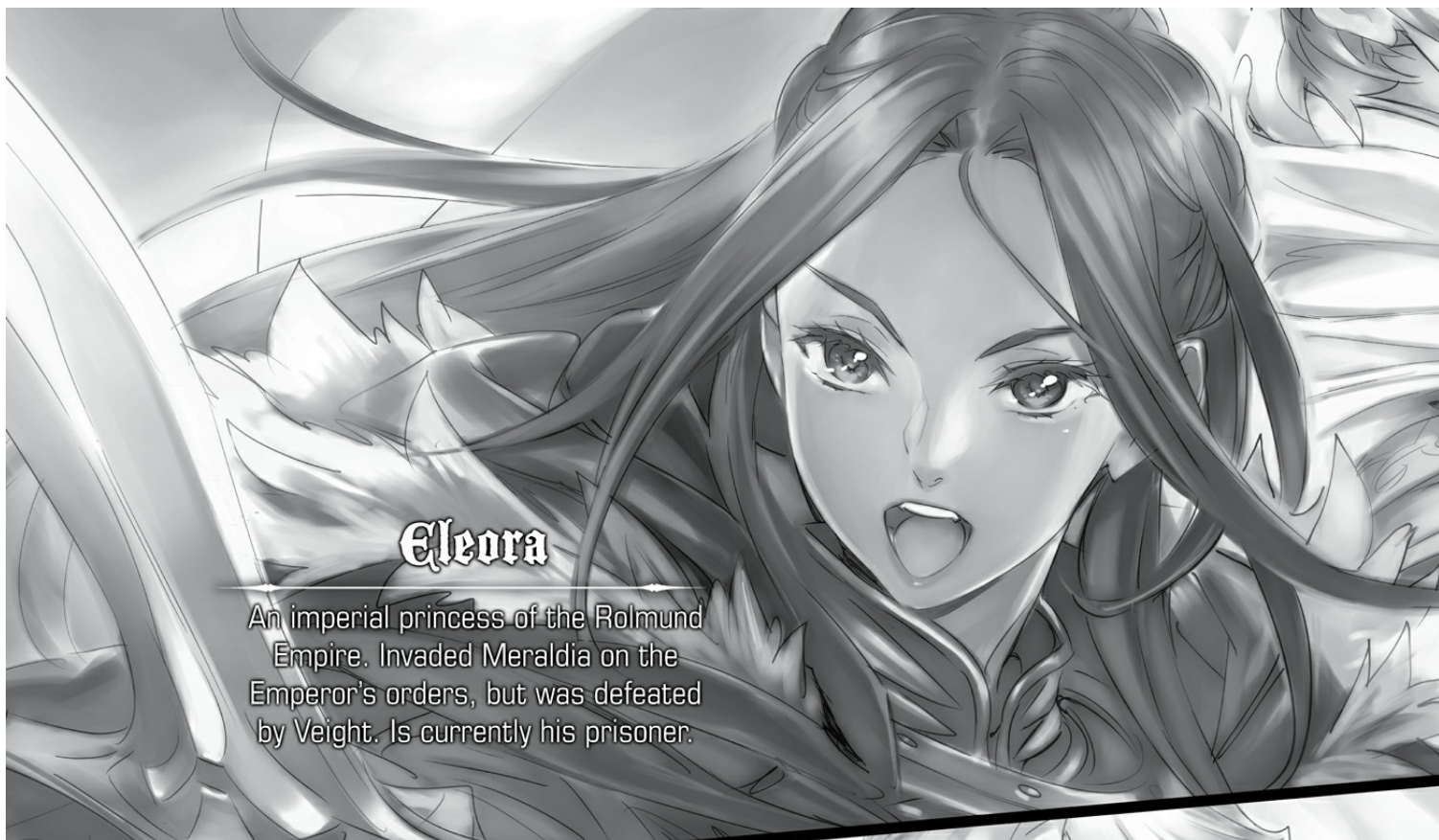
Natalia

A private in the Mage Corps and Eleora's friend. Due to their close age, Eleora treats Natalia more as a trusted aide than a subordinate.



Airia Lutte Aindorf

Viceroy of the trading city of Rynheit, and a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor. Despite her stunning looks, she prefers to dress in men's clothing.



Eleora

An imperial princess of the Rolmund Empire. Invaded Meraldia on the Emperor's orders, but was defeated by Veight. Is currently his prisoner.



Woro

The second son of the Doneiks family. Though he can be overbearing at times, he's a good man at heart.



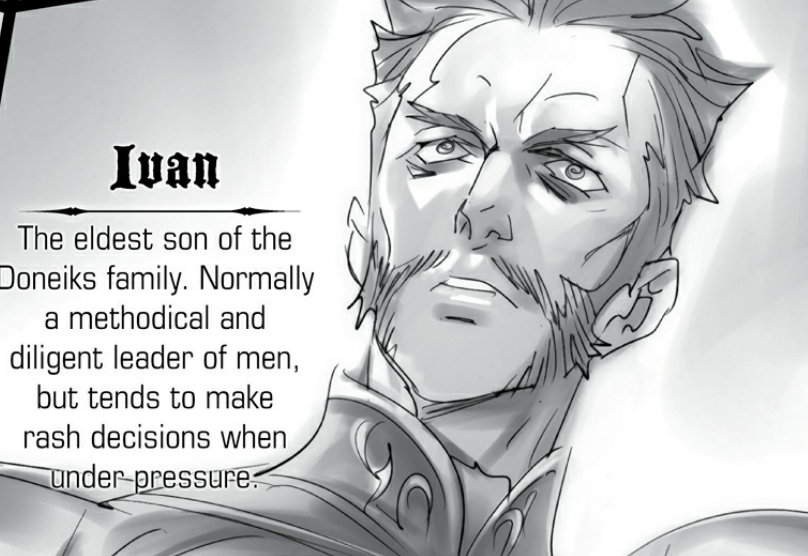
Ashley

Rolmund's crown prince. Loved by the populace thanks to his gentle demeanor and beautiful appearance.



Ryunnie

Ivan's only son. While he has technically had his coming-of-age ceremony, he's still an innocent young kid.



Ivan

The eldest son of the Doneiks family. Normally a methodical and diligent leader of men, but tends to make rash decisions when under pressure.



The story so far

In order to secure lasting peace for Meraldia, Veight and his demon army companions travel north to Rolmund to crown Eleora as its Empress.

By spreading the false claim that she succeeded in subjugating Meraldia, they're able to strengthen her popularity, thus making her a serious contender in the bid for the throne. But as supporters grow in number, so too do her enemies. Many of the noble factions do not look kindly upon Eleora, and before long Veight is forced into numerous duels to protect her honor. He trounces all his foes in an overwhelming display of martial might and tactical acumen, and within days the foreign visitor to Rolmund has become the talk of the whole empire.

Soon enough, Veight and Eleora find themselves invited to a party hosted by the powerful Lord Doneiks—the younger brother of the Emperor. Despite knowing it to be a thinly-veiled attempt by the Lord to recruit them into his faction, they attend anyway in the hopes of learning something about their political rivals.

Not long after the eventful banquet, the ailing Emperor passes away. With the throne now vacant, the battle for succession begins to escalate, forcing Veight and Eleora to spring into action. A time of turmoil has come to Rolmund...

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Chapter 6

Winters in the northern empire of Rolmund were long and cold. And this one would prove longer and colder than most, since the emperor, Bahazoff the Fourth, had just died.

“Oh, I got another letter from Airia.”

—Airia’s Reply: 3—

Dear Veight,

The news that Rolmund’s emperor, Bahazoff the Fourth, has died is deeply disturbing. While I have been receiving regular reports on the empire’s political happenings, could you give me an update on the current state of affairs? The information I’ve been receiving isn’t enough to give me a complete picture of such a complex situation. While I personally regret that we had to send you to maneuver such a turbulent environment, Meraldia is fortunate to have you, Lord Veight. If anyone can survive the violent maelstrom that will surely follow the emperor’s passing, it’s you.

Incidentally, the Commonwealth Council has decided to formally extend its condolences to the empire. However, we are currently unable to send anything more than a hastily penned letter by Lord Belken, so please supplement it with an offering of your own. Be sure to continue aiding Princess Eleora as well. She needs your support now more than ever. And never forget, everyone in Meraldia is behind you.

Things in Ryunheit have been rather quiet. Thanks to the demon army’s support, our construction efforts are on schedule, and Meraldia’s roads are safe. Things have all settled down to the point where I’m considering leaving

the city for a while to come support you in Rolmund. Though, I suppose you would never allow it. I pray that Rolmund's winter comes to an end soon.

She's more worried about me than I thought. Guess I should write up a quick overview of what's going on here. I took out my pen and a piece of paper, and began to write.

—Veight's Letter to Airia: 5—

Dear Airia,

With the passing of the emperor, the succession struggle has grown far more turbulent. I'll list out the main factions currently vying for the crown.

First, there's the man who's next in line for the throne, Crown Prince Ashley. Most of West Rolmund's nobles are part of his fold, but he's made no big moves recently. That makes sense, since he doesn't need to do anything for the crown to pass to him. His supporters are resting on their laurels too. They're likely convinced he'll ascend the throne. Prince Ashley's older sister is fifth in line for the throne, and she hasn't made any overt moves either.

The next big faction is the Doneiks faction. Lord Doneiks is second in line for the throne, while his sons Prince Ivan and Prince Woroy are third and fourth in line respectively. They're probably the most dangerous faction. All of North Rolmund's nobles are behind them, and they have both prestige and influence. The biggest problem is that the sons of the Doneiks family are upstanding individuals, worthy of respect. To be honest, I don't want to fight them if I can help it.

Lastly, there's our faction, under Princess Eleora. She's lying exhausted on the couch right next to me, actually. She's just returned from the emperor's funeral.

Honestly, I'm quite tired as well. That aside though, Eleora has mellowed out a great deal these past few months. You wouldn't believe how often she smiles now. Reconciling with her uncle, Lord Kastoniev, seems to have done wonders for her. Thanks to her increased sociability, our faction's steadily growing in number. Had she been this personable when she invaded Meraldia, she might have managed to win the northern viceroys' loyalty. In hindsight, I'm glad we chose to support her bid for the throne. Don't worry, Lady Airia, I'll support her to the best of my abilities.

Alright, that should be good enough. This world didn't have an organized postal service, so sending letters was an expensive affair. Because I couldn't send too many, I naturally picked my words with care. As I finished writing the final paragraph, Lacy walked in and glanced over at my desk.

"Mister Veight, are you really going to send that letter?"

"Yeah. The sooner it reaches Airia the better. I've outlined the current situation for her, which is information the council definitely needs right now."

I brought out an envelope to put the letter in while Lacy turned to Eleora and asked, "Princess Eleora, are you sure it's okay to let him send that letter?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because I mean...you know?"

"I'm sorry Lacy, but I have no idea what you're trying to say."

Is my letter too formal or something? Back on Earth, my friends often teased me about how businesslike my texts sounded.

"Lacy, could you check over my letter for me? I'm a demon, so I can't really tell if there's something wrong with my tone or anything."

"Oh... Uh, sure. I can."

Lacy nodded, and I handed the letter to her. *Guess there's at least time to revise it before I send it.* I turned to Eleora and asked, "I never got the chance to

meet the emperor, but his life wasn't too exceptional, right? I'd like to tell Airia more about him, so could you tell me a few stories?"

"Yeah, sure. When Emperor Bahazoff's father died, there was a similar power struggle to see who would ascend the throne."

Eleora shrugged off her mourning robe and sighed in relief. Until recently, I'd been stuck giving my condolences to everyone too, so I understood how she felt. Since I was here as a representative of Meraldia, it was important that I looked solemn and dignified and such. On top of that, I'd basically just been reciting a speech Kite had written for me, so the whole ordeal had been pretty tiring. Eleora took a sip of the tea Natalia had brewed for her and continued her story.

"At the time, Bahazoff was the crown prince, so everyone expected him to take power. The coronation went smoothly...on paper."

Many of the nobles who'd been critical of Bahazoff suddenly became embroiled in scandals and had their lands confiscated. In retaliation, the emperor's mistress, a famous singer, was forced to retire and enter a monastery. But for the most part, those power struggles at least ended without bloodshed. However, shortly after the coronation ceremony, Bahazoff's cousin went missing during a hunt in North Rolmund. The next day, his body was found in a completely different location. Officially, the cause of death had been a bear attack, and his death had been chalked up as an accident. Eleora smiled thinly.

"Only a few people even within the royal family have access to coroner reports, but I guess bears in North Rolmund wield swords and don't hibernate. They wield them pretty well, too."

So he was killed by a swordmaster, huh? I was suddenly reminded of the Sword Saint Barnack, Lord Doneiks' trusted confidante. Originally he'd been a noble who owned a small parcel of land in Northern Rolmund. At any rate, the hunting incident Eleora was talking about was infamous enough that even I'd heard of it. Apparently, the cousin who died had been the one most obsessed with taking the crown. After his death, Bahazoff's other cousins backed off.

"Lord Doneiks had been part of the hunt Bahazoff's cousin died in. Of course, officially the reports just claimed that he, too, was attacked by wild bears and

was saved by Ser Barnack.”

However, the common belief was that Lord Doneiks had been behind the assassination, and that he’d done it to protect his brother’s position. After that, Lord Doneiks had continued protecting his brother’s crown, and shown no outward interest in taking the throne himself. In truth, however, Lord Doneiks simply used protecting his brother as an excuse to do as he pleased. On the other hand, Bahazoff had little ambition, which was why most nobles preferred having someone like him on the throne, especially because of how conservative-minded he was. In the thirty or so years of his reign, the empire progressed very little, but at the same time, it was left in a stable position where the baton could easily be passed down to the next ruler. I sighed, realizing why everyone had called him things like “the most boring emperor in history”.

“In times of peace, not rocking the boat is a valid strategy. If you think about it that way, he was probably a competent emperor at least.”

Eleora nodded in agreement.

“You could say that.”

“It doesn’t sound like he was a terribly interesting person, but I still would have liked to meet him at least once.”

Eleora shook her head, her expression troubled.

“You’re Meraldia’s representative. Had you been granted an audience with him, you would have been forced to negotiate the details of Meraldia’s surrender. But as you can see, he was no master of politics. While our current situation isn’t entirely his fault, the empire is on the verge of collapse.”

Considering his personality, Bahazoff’s style of leadership had probably been to allow anything that had a precedent, and disallow anything that didn’t. There was no way governing like that would help break Rolmund out of its gradual decline. Most nobles seemed to have realized this as well, and they’d decided to wait until after Prince Ashley took the throne before bringing up the topic of Meraldia’s surrender. As a result, we’d been able to build up a decent base of power within Rolmund in the interim. Starting with Ser Lekomya, we’d begun bringing the younger nobles—most of whom possessed no land—into our

camp. Furthermore, Lord Kastoniev was hard at work gathering the East Rolmund nobles to our cause.

I sipped the tea Natalia had made and considered our options going forward. The hot tea warmed my frozen extremities.

“It’s true the empire’s already beginning to buckle. You can see the cracks. Like you said before, it’s inevitable that people will begin to realize there’s an impending crisis.”

The empire’s power was split between landed lords, the Sonnenlicht sect, landless nobles, the military, and the academics. There were just too many factions. The problem was, all of these factions had been built up over generations, so none of them wanted to relinquish any of their power or identity. I’d need Eleora to unify them by force once she became empress.

“Now then, our immediate concern is who’s going to be the next emperor. Eleora, how about you just go up and grab the crown?”

“Hahaha...”

Eleora chuckled at my joke. I’d written as much in my letter to Airia, but it really did feel as though Eleora had mellowed out a lot recently. Maybe it was because she’d gotten more allies.

“I’ll do that after I’ve crushed my rivals.”

Well, I guess some things never change. At present, Prince Ashley was slated to be the next emperor. On the surface, Lord Doneiks and his sons approved of him becoming the new emperor. It was hard to be sure what they were really thinking, though.

Naturally, Eleora and the other contenders for the throne couldn’t publicly claim they wanted it. If they did, the other factions would band together to shut them down. Since we were still in the mourning period of Bahazoff’s death, the coronation ceremony had been put off for a bit. But it was still almost guaranteed that Ashley would be the next emperor.

“Most of the nobles in the capital support Prince Ashley, as do the majority of West Rolmund’s lords. On top of that, he has the backing of the Sonnenlicht Church.”

The Sonnenlicht Church was what held the most influence with the common people, so anyone aiming to be emperor needed them on their side. Furthermore, the imperial capital was in West Rolmund. Militarily, it was essential that any contender for the throne had some support with West Rolmund's nobles.

"For now, Prince Ashley's power is secure. He'll almost certainly ascend the throne."

"Indeed. And usurping the throne through force won't be easy."

Forget Rolmund, even the capital was far too big for my small werewolf squad to occupy. We needed more time to prepare before we tried anything.

As I was musing over my options, Hamaam walked into the room. He and Monza were my primary spies in the capital. He seemed to be in a hurry.

"Vice-Commander, I'm sorry for leaving my post, but I have an urgent message."

"What is it?"

He brushed some snow off his shoulder and said, "Moments ago, a carriage left the Doneiks manor. My squad confirmed that Prince Ivan and Lord Doneiks are riding in it."

"Seriously?"

This was way too fast. I hadn't expected this. According to Ser Lekomya, Lord Doneiks had planned to stay in the capital a while longer. This sudden change in the Archduke's plans did not bode well. I needed to move carefully.

"Hamaam, you're good at tracking carriages, right?"

He never talked about his past, but I'm pretty sure he'd once been a caravan raider in the windswept dunes. As expected, Hamaam nodded.

"Yes, Vice-Commander."

"Tail the carriage. I'll have Monza's squad take over monitoring the manor."

"Roger."

Taciturn as always, Hamaam said just that, saluted, and left. I turned back to Eleora and asked, “Did something happen with Lord Doneiks?”

“I’m not sure, but solidifying his base in the capital should be the most important thing for him right now. It’s strange that he’d choose to leave.”

Eleora furrowed her brow.

“What’s even stranger is that he didn’t take his grandson, Ryuunie with him. Prince Woroy’s staying behind, but Ryuunie is Prince Ivan’s son so you’d think he’d be with him.”

Good point. Prince Woroy and Ryuunie made for a strange combination to remain behind and hold the fort. I cocked my head.

“Maybe they’re returning to their territories to prepare for a rebellion...but then they would have taken Ryuunie with them.”

Furthermore, winter was almost here. There was no telling when the roads leading to North Rolmund would become buried in snow. It was possible Lord Doneiks had set some plan I wasn’t aware of into motion. I got to my feet and donned my thick fur coat.

“I’m going as well. Fahn’s squad are your personal bodyguards, so you’ll be safe even in my absence.”

“I’m not too worried about myself but...you should take care, Lord Veight.”

“I know. Kite, you’re coming with me!”

I called for my trusty vice-commander and dashed out of the room. He was a master of intelligence-gathering, so I wanted him with me.

—Prince Ivan’s Tactics—

I looked at my aging father’s visage and steeled my resolve. He looked at the light snow flurry falling outside and muttered, “For all his reign, people insulted my brother as an incompetent, unremarkable emperor. But do you have any

idea how hard it is to be unremarkable as a ruler?” He added, “My brother was nowhere near as incompetent as the people thought him. The fact that he was unremarkable proves how diligent he was.”

“But when he realized his death was near, he couldn’t bear to leave behind a legacy of mediocrity, right?”

“That’s right, Ivan. When his symptoms first appeared, my brother told me this: ‘Zweinei, I wish to achieve something momentous, lest I end up nothing more than a footnote in history books. I would like to have at least a paragraph dedicated to me.’”

Because I was scrutinizing my father’s expression, I could tell.

“But, Father, you didn’t agree with his wishes, did you? You’re the one who made it so only Eleora and her personal troops would be used for the invasion.”

“Indeed. My brother and I were sworn friends whose bonds ran thicker than blood. But that was because we shared a common goal. To halt the slow decline of the empire. I believed my brother’s campaign to conquer the south would only bleed our empire of resources.”

My father’s ability to separate his personal feelings from his duty was what made him strong. His eyes glazed over slightly as he stared out the window.

“Do you think me a cold-hearted brother, Ivan?”

I shook my head.

“No. If you hadn’t stepped in, we would have lost countless soldiers to the harsh mountain crossing, and the unfamiliar climate of the south. I respect your decision, Father.”

The late emperor truly had been a mediocre ruler if conquest was the only thing he could think of to leave his mark on history. If he’d truly been invested in conquering Meraldia, he should have spent much longer preparing. *Though I suppose the same could be said for me.* I was quickly running out of time.

“Father, about my proposition to set up an agricultural research station in Darmarl...”

My father shook his head.

“Wait. That village may be under your jurisdiction, but we need to hear what the overseers have to say too.”

“They’re too superstitious to agree to my experiment and you know it.”

The sacred Sonnenlicht scriptures contained a detailed chapter dedicated to proper farming methods. Before Sonnenlicht had spread throughout the empire, rural villages used to hold sacrificial rituals to pray for a good harvest. The farming chapter had been added to the texts in order to stamp out such barbaric practices. However, the farming methods in the Sonnenlicht scriptures were outdated and inefficient. They were the shackles preventing Rolmund from improving its agricultural techniques.

Father sighed and said, “In that case, I cannot approve of the station. If we anger the overseers, we risk losing control over the serfs. In the end, that would lead to revolt, and a steeper drop in agricultural production.”

“You’re right of course, but...”

We don’t have any time left.

“Father, if we don’t do something now, Ryuunie’s generation will have to pay the price for our negligence. This is for the sake of the Doneiks family, and North Rolmund as a whole. Please, grant me permission to build the station.”

“You’re being awfully obstinate today, Ivan.”

“The other day, I spoke with Lord Veight about Rolmund’s agricultural issues. Even a foreigner like him was able to instantly see the danger.”

Father narrowed his eyes.

“Of course he would. He’s an outsider; he knows nothing of our customs and he has no vested interests clouding his judgment. More than anything though, he’s highly educated and thinks rationally. If everyone was as intelligent as him, I’d have no qualms about allowing your experiments.”

I couldn’t think of any way to argue back. He was absolutely right. But at the same time, we couldn’t just stand there and do nothing. For Ryuunie’s sake, our generation needed to take action.

“In that case, Father, let us obtain Meraldia’s lands for ourselves. If we can

turn the northern sector of Meraldia into North Rolmund's vassal state, we can start importing their grain."

Furthermore, turning Meraldia into our colony would bring in more tax revenue and stimulate trade. Actually colonizing Meraldia was easier said than done, but it was perhaps a more realistic prospect than revolutionizing Rolmund's agriculture. However, Father shook his head again.

"Don't be a fool. Why do you think Lord Veight has come to Rolmund? He's here to protect Meraldia's interests. A skilled diplomat like him won't part with Meraldia's cities."

My father had a point. Lord Veight was Meraldia's representative. While it would be reassuring to have him as an ally, if our interests ran contrary to his, he'd make for a formidable foe. Our options truly were limited. I floated a few other suggestions to my father, but he rejected them all. The only other card I had left to play was my trump card, but this last suggestion was the only one I didn't want to make.

"Father, if it's come to this, maybe you should usurp the th—"

"No. Absolutely not."

Father flatly rejected my proposal.

"Were Ashley an incompetent ruler, I may have considered it, but he's a skilled politician. Pointless strife will only serve to weaken the empire further."

"But at this rate, the empire will wither away regardless. Ashley has no interest in expanding Rolmund's territory. He'll likely permit Meraldia the right to govern itself."

I nearly rose to my feet without thinking, but my father held out a hand to stop me.

"Even if he does, we simply have to undermine Meraldia's economy and military over time. We do still have some time. I'm confident Ashley realizes this as well."

"But Father, Meraldia has Lord Veight."

Of all people, Meraldia had chosen Lord Veight to be their first diplomat to

Rolmund. However, I felt as though he was far too important a figure to risk on a preliminary diplomatic mission like this. Though I didn't want to consider this possibility, what if Meraldia was filled with nobles just as crafty and skilled as he was? If it was, we couldn't underestimate the small southern nation. On the other hand, if he truly was Meraldia's best, then it meant Meraldia's government was willing to risk even their greatest asset if it meant strengthening their position. Either way, Meraldia couldn't be underestimated.

"We can't afford to take Meraldia lightly. They may have surrendered to Rolmund, but I fear if we make even the slightest mistake, they'll have a dagger to our throats."

"Ivan," Father's voice was calm, but cold. "Your impatience has clouded your judgment. As your father, I cannot allow you to make a mistake you will later regret. Take some time off from governing and cool your head."

"Father!?"

He's removing me from government at this critical juncture!? Steeling my resolve, I knocked three times on the carriage door. The carriage came to a halt. We were currently in the middle of the mountains. There was nothing around us but snow. Quietly, Father asked, "Ivan, what are you doing?"

Trembling in fear, I replied, "Please step outside, Father."

Sighing, he got to his feet and stepped out of the carriage. In seconds, my guards drew their swords and surrounded him. While they weren't as strong as Barnack the Sword Saint, they were all handpicked elites from the Doneiks army. Still completely composed, my father regarded the guards.

"Your loyalty to my son is admirable. In deference to that loyalty, I am willing to forgive your transgressions. So please, help me stop my son from committing a grave mistake."

For a moment, the guards' expressions wavered. *Not good.*

"Cut him down!"

Before I even finished shouting, Father drew his sword.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Of my four guards, one threw his sword down and surrendered. A few sentences from my father were enough to rob him of the will to fight. The remaining three now had to worry about a potential traitor stabbing them in the backs.

Father struck deftly, his sword weaving in and out. Before the guards could attack, he cut one of them down. Seeing their companion fall, the other two hurriedly threw themselves at Lord Doneiks. However, he made short work of them as well. He moved so fast I couldn't even see what had happened. Father's swordsmanship was nothing short of godlike. Even North Rolmund's harshest blizzards weren't this fierce. Father then stabbed his sword through the chest of the guard who'd surrendered.

"Forgive me. But no one can know of what happened here."

Through words and swordsmanship alone, Father had defeated four assassins in the blink of an eye.

"There are many who believe they can assassinate me so long as they remove Barnack from my side. I have Barnack show off his skills precisely to lead people into believing that."

Father turned to me and raised his bloodstained sword.

"However, I have often assassinated my enemies myself. If you wish to perform deeds you want to keep absolutely secret, you have no choice but to do them yourself."

So this is who my father truly is? What a monster.

"Your mistake was choosing to slay me with swords and not poison, Ivan. Why did you make such a choice?"

"P-Poison...should be reserved for fools like Schmevinsky. Did you not always say that when your end came, you would want it to be in battle, Father?"

I'd wanted to offer him at least that much respect, but it seemed my methods had backfired. Father smiled.

"When you wish to take someone's life, you shouldn't let sentiment cloud your judgment. Until their last breath, think of nothing but how to kill them."

Father looked at me and sighed, “If you truly wanted to kill me, you shouldn’t have left Ryuunie in the capital. Even minor details like this are enough to tip people off.”

“B-But...”

“You did not want him to witness his father killing his grandfather? You’re far too soft. Plotting assassinations isn’t for you.”

I could say nothing back. I drew my sword, but I knew I stood no chance against my father. His voice still calm, he said, “Sheathe your sword, Ivan. I have no intention of killing you. Let’s talk this through.”

“I-I can’t turn back anymore!”

The moment I’d resolved to kill my father, I’d prepared myself to be killed by him in turn. I brandished my sword. But then, I was overcome by a tremendous coughing fit. It seemed even the slightest bit of exercise was enough to bring it on now. *Curses! I can’t die here! For Ryuunie and North Rolmund’s sake, I need to take action while I can still do anything at all!* But when Father saw me start to cough, instead of running me through he dropped his sword and rushed to my side.

“Oh no, is it another seizure!? This is why you...”

Right now, he’s completely defenseless. The moment I thought that, my body moved before I could think. I drew my dagger and plunged it into my father’s heart.

“Ngh...”

Father brought a hand to his chest, then smiled weakly at me.

“See, now that’s how you do it... Never forget what you did here today.”

Still coughing, I watched as a red stain spread across Father’s chest.



What have I done? Father staggered to his feet and leaned against the carriage wall.

“If you’re determined enough to kill me, then I suppose I can leave the fate of the Doneiks family and the empire in your hands... But Ivan, whatever you do, do not mobilize the army. At least not yet.”

A trickle of blood spilled from Father’s lips and he wiped it unceremoniously with his sleeve.

“And if circumstances force you to, make sure you win, no matter what it takes... The same way you succeeded in killing me...”

The light slowly began to vanish from Father’s eyes.

“Oh yes, Ivan...I have one last request...”

“Wh-What is it, Father!?”

Father closed his eyes and smiled.

“I promised Ryuunie...that on his next birthday...I’d teach him how to make parquetry... Please teach him...in my stead...”

Father trailed off.

“...Father?”

But there was no reply. The strength drained from his legs, and he collapsed onto the ground. My father, Lord Doneiks, was dead.

I headed to the Doneiks manor, but all I was able to do was get an audience with Prince Woroy.

“Yeah, my dad and brother went back to our lands to resolve some issue or the other. They said they’d be back before the snow gets any worse.”

Despite the fact that we were political rivals, he smiled amicably at me. *You really should be more cautious around me, you know.*

“By the way, Lord Veight, I heard you talked with my brother about our agricultural woes the other day.”

“Indeed, what he had to say was quite troubling.”

I debated whether or not to tell Prince Woroy about how the drop in production might be related to Lord Doneiks’ river project. In the end, I decided against it. If I wasn’t careful in my wording, my statements could be misconstrued as insults.

“I’ve actually been trying to see if I can be of any help.”

“Oh, really? Thanks, I really like that side of you.” Prince Woroy smiled again. “We may be politically opposed, but as leaders, it’s our responsibility to avoid getting the populace embroiled in our conflicts. Both to protect our honor as nobles, and to prevent the state from growing weaker. Isn’t that so?”

“You’re absolutely right.”

Prince Woroy nodded in agreement and replied, “I’m glad someone virtuous like you is our rival, Lord Veight.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

I never knew how to act around this guy. He was just too honest. But at the same time, he used that honesty as a weapon. Though he looked like he wasn’t thinking, he was always analyzing people’s reactions to his statements. I couldn’t afford to let my guard down.

While talking with Prince Woroy was more relaxing than dealing with other nobles, I couldn’t afford to stay long. *I wonder if Hamaam managed to catch up to Lord Doneiks’ carriage?* Even for Hamaam, it would have been difficult to pinpoint what path the carriage took through the city, and even if he managed that, it was possible the guards at the gate wouldn’t let him leave. Of course, it’d be a piece of cake if he transformed, but... Prince Woroy walked over to a nearby cabinet and took out an expensive glass bottle.

“Since my fussy dad’s not around, why not stay for a drink? I’ve got a bottle of Cavarantain distilled brandy here.” He shook the bottle, sloshing around the amber liquid inside. “I hate drinking alcohol cut with water, but dad always complains I go through bottles too fast because I don’t. Do you guys have

problems like that in Meraldia, too?”

I smiled to myself as I thought back to the drinking culture back home. I shook my head and said, “Indeed, alcohol is a luxury item even in Meraldia. Someone who gets paid as little as I do can’t afford to drink frequently.”

The demon army made sure its soldiers were clothed, fed, and sheltered, but we paid more in goods than cash, so I wasn’t very rich. My work on the council was of course unpaid, so my income was low too. Being a vice-commander meant I got a bit more money than regular foot soldiers, but most of it was spent treating other people. While I was curious how that brandy tasted, I couldn’t afford to get drunk right now. I got to my feet and bowed to Prince Woroy.

“I appreciate the kind offer, but I’m afraid I must decline. My work for the day is not yet done. Besides, if I am too accepting of your goodwill, Princess Eleora will scold me again.”

“If she gets too mad at you, just come to us instead. I’ll make you my vice-commander.”

Oh, a vice-commander... I do like that title, but unfortunately I’m already vice-commander to the Demon Lord.

“You honor me, Prince Woroy. Now I’m conflicted.”

“Hahaha! I guess I must have grown a little if I can get you flustered now, huh?”

Prince Woroy got to his feet and called for a maid to escort me out. From the way he talked, I doubted he was involved in whatever scheme Lord Doneiks and Prince Ivan were up to. As I followed the maid out, Prince Woroy shouted, “I’m too much of a fool to know what it is you’re scheming, Lord Veight. But I believe the day will eventually come when our interests align. I hope you’ll join me then!”

I turned around and bowed to Prince Woroy again and said, “I hope such a day comes as well, Your Highness.”

Though I doubted it would. As I exited the Doneiks Manor, I found Hamaam waiting in a nearby alleyway.

“I’m sorry, Vice-Commander. I lost sight of the carriage.”

“It managed to give *you* the slip?”

Looking uncharacteristically apologetic, Hamaam explained, “The carriage we were chasing was a fake. The only things inside it were the prince and the archduke’s coats.”

So Lord Doneiks had predicted he might be tailed. There was definitely something suspicious going on.

“Hamaam, call everyone back to Eleora’s mansion. Tell them they can’t be spotted coming back.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once all my werewolves were gathered, I sent them on a search for Lord Doneiks’ carriage. By sundown, one squad had finally picked up on the carriage’s tracks. They led deep into the mountains, a good distance from the capital. There, we found traces of blood covered by fresh snow, and deep furrows that could only be made by carriage wheels. There were no bodies.

“I guess someone attacked Lord Doneiks’ carriage,” I muttered. Fahn cocked her head.

“But who?”

“No clue. With the coronation ceremony approaching, there are dozens of people who’d want him dead.”

Prince Ashley could have been behind the attack, or maybe someone from Eleora’s faction acted without permission. It was also possible someone within the Doneiks family had planned this. I turned to Monza, who had her nose to the ground and was sniffing at the blood.

“Can you track where the carriage went after this?”

“Heh, easily. The stench of blood’s still hovering over that carriage. Give me a sec.”

Monza gave me a confident nod and walked off.

“Huh...” But a few moments later she returned, confused. “The snow’s making it impossible to track the scent.”

The other werewolves all cocked their heads as well. In truth, I couldn’t track the scent either. Meanwhile, Kite was casting epoch magic over the bloodstains to see if he could glean anything from observing past events. Considering his skill, and the fact that barely half a day had passed since the attack, I assumed he’d figure something out before long. When he finished, the blood drained from his face and he turned to me.

“Veight, Lord Doneiks was assassinated.”

“So that old man finally kicked the bucket? What about Prince Ivan?”

“Well... Prince Ivan was the perpetrator.”

What? I folded my arms and mulled over that revelation, ignoring the snow that had started falling again. The other werewolves shot me worried looks, but I needed to sort things out before I could tell them anything. When I’d talked to Prince Ivan, he’d been worried about the future of Rolmund. Furthermore, his health was poor. I’d noticed his breathing occasionally became erratic when he talked. Though, it was something slight enough that you wouldn’t notice without a werewolf’s enhanced hearing.

“Kite. What reasons do you think Prince Ivan would have for killing Lord Doneiks?”

“I’m not good at conjecture...but Prince Ivan wasn’t like those old scumbags who ran the Senate. I doubt he was just after power. He must have had a good reason for what he did.”

Kite wrapped his thick wool coat tighter around himself. I agreed with his assessment. From what I knew of Price Ivan, there was no way he’d do this to be emperor.

“Going off of just the information I have, I feel like Prince Ivan was getting impatient.”

“Impatient about what?”

The state of Prince Ivan’s health was a secret as far as I knew.

“Prince Ivan’s not in good health. He won’t live much longer. Furthermore, his father was old and cautious, while his only son, Prince Ryuunie, will soon be an adult.”

“Ah...I see now. He wants to do something for his kid while he’s still alive, doesn’t he?”

“I believe so.”

I had no idea what Prince Ivan was planning, but whatever it was, it was a large enough undertaking that he’d needed to remove his father to make it happen. The Garney brothers, who hadn’t kept up with the conversation at all, stopped playing around in the snow and looked up at me.

“Hey, Veight. What are we supposed to do now?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? Events are going to be revolving around Prince Ryuunie for a while. My guess is Prince Ivan’s going to call him back to the Doneiks’ family lands. When he does, we need to tail him.”

Now that he’d gone this far, there was no way Prince Ivan would risk leaving his son in the capital. He’d want Ryuunie somewhere safe. And the safest place for him was the Doneiks’ estates within North Rolmund. By tailing Ryuunie, we’d be able to figure out which castle Prince Ivan considered his most impregnable stronghold. Chances were, the only reason he’d left Ryuunie behind this time was that he didn’t want his son watching his father kill his grandfather. But thanks to his naivete, we’d be able to gather intel.

“Just in case, I’m assigning someone to guard Prince Woroy. I doubt Prince Ivan will try to kill him as well, but it’s better to be safe than sorry. I’d feel bad if he died.”

“Oi, boss. He’s our enemy, isn’t he? Why’re we protecting him?”

Jerrick was right of course, but I was rather fond of Prince Woroy. Naturally, that wasn’t a good enough reason to risk my comrades, though.

“We have to ascertain whether or not he was in on the plot. Until then, we need to keep an eye on his movements and keep him alive. Besides, while he may be an enemy, he’s an enemy we can reason with. We can’t let him die.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Unless we’re planning on slaughtering everyone, it’s better to leave enemies like that alive. Or else the fighting’ll go on forever. If we kill all the reasonable enemies, who are we going to negotiate peace with?”

For demons, who liked to thoroughly root out all enemies, this was probably a difficult concept to grasp. I turned to my werewolves and said, “Let’s get out of here before Doneiks’ troops arrive. Once we’re back in Eleora’s mansion we can analyze what we’ve learned. Everyone, be ready to fight at any time.”

“Aye!”

I had no idea what move Prince Ivan would make next, but he’d gone past the point of no return. This snowbound land would soon be awash in blood.

The moment we got back to Eleora’s mansion, I explained the situation to her and started making arrangements to prepare for any situation. In emergencies like this, responding fast was crucial. We needed accurate reports on what our allies and rivals were doing, of course, but even more importantly we needed to act fast before people had time to analyze our actions. Just sending out messengers was nerve-wracking right now.

I spent all night sending reports and taking stock of who was where. The sun was beginning to crest the horizon by the time I could finally take a break. I slumped at my desk, and Natalia brought me a cup of black tea and a sandwich. The sandwich smelled like roast beef.

“Lord Veight, would you like a midnight snack?”

“Sure, thanks. Oh yes, could you bring some food for my aides too?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve asked the maids to bring them the same food I brought you.”

I was beginning to see why Natalia was Eleora’s favorite. Just then, Kite and Lacy walked into the room, looking exhausted. The maids brought them their food, and we all sat down to eat together.

“So what happens now?”

Kite shot me a worried look as he wolfed down his sandwich. To be honest, I was pretty worried as well. Lord Doneiks, who was second in line for the throne, had been killed by Prince Ivan, who was third in line. The logical conclusion was that Prince Ivan was aiming for the throne. Even if that wasn't truly the case, that's what everyone in Rolmund would think.

My guess was Prince Ivan would try to hide the death of Lord Doneiks. After all, killing your father was a grievous sin. *Actually, hold on. There's one other way he could play this.* I'd become more accustomed to assassinations than I would have liked, so I had a lot of experience with how they played out. As soon as this other possibility occurred to me I said, "If Prince Ivan really wants the crown, he'll mobilize North Rolmund's army and attack West Rolmund."

"So we're gonna get stuck in another war."

Kite frowned. Lacy looked worried as well.

"If it does become a war, what'll happen to us?"

I have no idea. Of course telling her that would just make her more worried. After thinking about it for a few seconds, I gave her the only answer I could.

"We're part of Eleora's faction, so if Prince Ashley and Prince Ivan go to war, we can remain neutral. Our best option would be to see how things progress and back the side that's going to win."

If it came to war, Prince Ivan's side would be firmly in the wrong, so it'd be dangerous to support them. At the same time, there was little merit to backing Prince Ashley. Besides, if we came out in support for Prince Ashley now, the Doneiks side would know we have spies watching them. Until Prince Ashley noticed something was strange, we were better off just sitting tight. That said, explaining all this to Lacy was a pain, so I just gave her the abridged summary.

"Anyway, even if a war does break out, you two won't have to fight. You can leave the killing to me and my werewolves."

Natalia, who'd been listening in all this time, puffed her chest out and said, "The 209th Imperial Mage Corps will fight too! I'm certain East Rolmund's nobles will back Princess Eleora as well."

"As long as Lord Kastoniev asks them to, I'm sure they will."

Just then, Hamaam walked into the room.

“It seems Prince Ashley isn’t aware of what’s happened yet.”

“He might just be playing dumb. Keep watch over his troops in shifts. I’ll send another squad to do that now, so you and your squad get some rest.”

“Roger, Vice-Commander.”

I’d already sent a messenger to Lord Kastoniev, and I’d told Ser Lekomya and the other palace nobles to remain vigilant. As Hamaam left, Fahn walked into the room, a half-eaten sandwich in her hand.

“Did someone deliver you food as well, Veight?”

“Yeah, we got our food. You should rest, I’ll have someone take up your position for a bit.”

Fahn scowled at me.

“You need to rest too, Veight. Once morning comes, we’ll be even busier. There’s no one who can take your place, so you should rest while you still can.”

She had a point. I was too strung up to sleep, but I still got to my feet after finishing off my sandwich.

“Alright, I’ll sleep for a little bit. If anything happens...report to Eleora.”

The moment I entered my room, I suddenly felt drowsy. While I had no idea what time it was, I was pretty sure I had a few hours before morning at least. I collapsed onto my bed and fell asleep.

When I woke up the next day, it was already noon. I rubbed my eyes and looked up at the sun.

“How come no one woke me up?”

There was no reply. I walked into the parlor and saw most of my werewolves collapsed on the floor. The Garney brothers were sleeping in the doorway, so I stepped over them and entered the room.

“Morning. What happened after I went to sleep?”

Jerrick and his squad turned to me. I’d rotated them out to rest first, which

was why they were awake.

“Boss, shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“Yeah, we haven’t heard anything at all.”

Well that’s a surprise. I sunk into a nearby sofa and Monza snuck up on me from behind. She had a brush in her hands.

“Sheesh boss, you should at least comb your hair when you get up.”

“Eh, my hair’ll fix itself by evening.”

“It’s already noon, so I doubt that. Now shut up and let me brush it.”

Who cares what my hair looks like? It was too troublesome to argue, so I let Monza mess with my hair.

“By the way, did any reports come in while I was asleep?”

“Hmm... Nothing from my squad. Hey, stop squirming.” Monza used her free hand to hold my head in place. As she wrestled my bedhead under control she continued, “We sent off the fastest horse we had to deliver your message to Lord Kastoniev like you asked.”

In that case, Lord Kastoniev was probably telling his village overseers to prepare for battle. Since farmers had nothing to do in winter, drafting soldiers would likely not be difficult, but mobilizing them in the thick snow would be. As we talked, Fahn walked into the room and took the brush from Monza.

“Veight’s hair’s thick, so you have to be more forceful with your brushing. Like this.”

That hurts, Fahn. Please stop. Fahn tackled the pointless task of fixing my hair with gusto and said, “Borsche returned to Fort Novesk. He’s planning on coming back with the mage corps members stationed there.”

While the mage corps were few in number, they were veterans of urban warfare. They had infantry capable of blowing up castle walls, as well as cavalry skilled at navigating narrow alleys. Considering we couldn’t transform here, they’d be more useful than us werewolves.

“No one’s noticed we’ve started to move, have they?”

If anyone discovered we were mobilizing our forces, we'd be in trouble. Jerrick, who'd started repairing the parlor door's hinges on a whim, answered, "Nah, boss. The guys staking out the palace say there's nothing out of the ordinary. I think we're fine."

I sure hope so.

Lord Kastoniev arrived at Eleora's mansion by late afternoon. Once he did, we began our planning in earnest.

"This is quite a surprise. I never thought Prince Ivan would resort to assassination. Isn't he being a bit too hasty?"

I nodded in agreement.

"It appears Prince Ivan has some chronic disease. On top of that, he has a son. My guess is he wants to leave behind a stronger Rolmund for him, which is why he was willing to stain his hands and force a revolution."

"I see, so he's short on time..."

After mulling my words over for a few seconds Lord Kastoniev said, "If that's the case, it would be in our best interests to drag this conflict out. The more we do, the more impatient Prince Ivan will become and the sloppier his plans will be."

If we had to, we could hold out until Prince Ivan succumbed to illness. I was amazed Lord Kastoniev could say something so harsh so casually, though. *This is why Rolmund nobles scare me.*

Some time after Lord Kastoniev's arrival, I got a report that Prince Woroy and Prince Ryuunie had left their manor. Hamaam's squad was assigned to tailing them, so I wasn't too worried. They wouldn't be fooled by a decoy this time. Wherever Ryuunie ended up would be where Prince Ivan's primary stronghold was. It took an entire night after that before there was any movement in the palace.

"Prince Ashley's recalled all of the imperial guards back to the castle. He seems to be focusing on defending the castle, but he's also sent messengers to the nearby lords."

It was Ser Lekomya who brought me that report. I had no idea how much Prince Ashley knew, or where he'd gotten his information, but he was clearly preparing for war.

"Over the past few generations, it was only the last emperor who had a bloodless coronation," Ser Lekomya added with a sad smile. "To be honest, I was hoping this change of emperors would go peacefully too, so I could just get my land in Meraldia and take it easy in the south."

The whole reason I'm here is to stop you guys from getting Meraldia's lands, so I'm afraid you'll have to settle for something in North or West Rolmund. At the very least, this conflict would likely end with a good number of lords on both sides dead. Just then, Natalia ran into the parlor.

"Urgent news! Prince Ivan has raised an army to destroy Prince Ashley!"

"What!?" Ser Lekomya leapt out of his chair.

"What's his justification!?" I asked.

"Umm...he issued a public statement saying 'Prince Ashley assassinated my father, Lord Doneiks, because he feared my father would try to steal his throne. Such barbaric acts cannot be forgiven! Prince Ashley must be dragged from his throne and the crown returned to North Rolmund, where it belongs!'"

Despite being the culprit, it seemed Prince Ivan planned to use this assassination as an excuse to attack. It was the same tactic Meraldia's Senate used when they'd tried to frame me for the assassination of Zaria's viceroy. Whether or not the public would believe Prince Ivan hinged on his reputation. Since the Doneiks family were known schemers, I had the feeling people wouldn't buy his story that easily.

"Perfect!"

I nodded, and Ser Lekomya nervously turned to me.

"Are we going to fight as well?"

"No."

I shook my head.

"We'll remain neutral and avoid any collateral damage."

“Huh?”

Or rather, we'll appear to remain neutral.

Prince Ivan quickly rallied the North Rolmund lords and started marching onto the capital.

“Your Highness, it's not safe here. We should retreat to Fort Novesk.”

Borsche had just returned from the fort and was urging us all to fall back there. But Eleora shook her head and replied, “We have nothing to do with this assassination incident. In order to show that to the public as well, I need to remain here and remain neutral.”

While she had a point, and I respected her courage, the capital was definitely getting dangerous. Eleora was another one of Prince Ivan's political rivals, so if the northern rebels actually breached the city, her life would be in danger.

“Eleora, leave this manor to me and my werewolves. If you remain here, your servants will be forced to face the danger with you.”

Eleora was mindful of her subordinates so that gave her pause.

“You have a point. Yet...”

“The roads aren't completely buried in snow yet. You should go back to East Rolmund with Lord Kastoniev and start raising your own army.”

Since Rolmund's nobles all thought of me as Eleora's vice-commander, there'd be nothing strange about her returning to her home territories and leaving me in charge.

“I'm an official ambassador from Meraldia. Prince Ivan can't afford to harm me, or there'll be repercussions.”

They'll be more immediate than he thinks too. If he tries to attack us, I'll have everyone transform and ravage his army. A city like this was the perfect battlefield for us. Werewolves' surprise attack tactics were more effective in crowded streets than in an open plain. I could tell my men were getting restless too. Borsche backed up my words.

“Lord Veight is correct. Your Highness, right now we need to organize our forces at Fort Novesk. Regardless of whether we choose to back a side or enter

the fray as a third party, we need to marshal our forces first.”

“...Alright. You have a point.” After a pause, Eleora nodded and declared, “Tell the servants to return to their hometowns. If there are any who wish to fight with me, have them accompany us to Fort Novesk.”

I ordered the older female werewolves to guard Eleora on her way back. Since they all looked like old ladies, people would underestimate them, and Eleora could rest easy knowing she had a powerful set of bodyguards. I assigned Mary to be the leader of the squad.

“Once you’ve escorted Eleora to Novesk, you should rest there for a while. You’re not good with the cold, right, Mary?”

“My, you’ve gotten much better at treating ladies, Veight. We’ll be fine, so make sure you don’t die on us.”

I get it already, so could you stop patting my head? All of the older werewolves still treated me like a little kid.

Alright, now that Eleora’s gone I can do whatever I want. I headed into the manor’s kitchen and started boiling some bacon together with a bit of sauce while I thought on my next course of action.

“According to Hamaam, Prince Woroy’s staying at Creech Castle, which is one of North Rolmund’s smaller castles. But it sits on a lake at the border of North Rolmund, so it’s a good staging point to launch an offensive against the capital.” I explained the current situation to my werewolves while we all ate my strange bacon stew concoction. “Since it’s winter the lake that usually protects it is frozen over, but it’s still a pretty sturdy castle.”

I pointed to the map with my spoon while simultaneously asking Fahn for seconds.

“Prince Ivan’s son, Prince Ryuunie is in a castle further north. Specifically, he’s in the Doneiks family’s main castle, Kinjarl Castle. Chances are it’s too heavily defended to capture.”

I knew the castle was located in a mountainous region, but I didn’t have any specific geographical information.

“I imagine Prince Ivan’s offensive will carry him pretty far. Prince Ashley’s war preparations are lagging behind.”

My werewolves nodded, looking a little confused. They were all amateurs at large-scale warfare, so their understanding of battle lines and maps was limited. Jerrick wolfed down his stew and asked me, “Hey, boss, when are we gonna get to fight?”

“When one of the factions asks us to, probably. It wouldn’t be proper for us to enter the fight of our own volition.”

The ideal scenario would be Prince Ashley coming to us for salvation after Prince Ivan’s army had him cornered. We’d be able to even the scales, and turn this engagement into a war of attrition. The generals on both sides wouldn’t be happy about that, but I wasn’t here to make them happy. I was here to protect Meraldia. Besides, joining the fight would mean risking the lives of my men, as well as Eleora’s subordinates. I needed to act with prudence.

“Either way, we can’t do anything until Eleora raises an army. Armies in Rolmund are tens of thousands of men strong, our single werewolf unit can’t do anything by itself.”

It’d take at least a few days before we knew for sure which side had the advantage.

And so a few days passed. North Rolmund had been hit with a lot of snowfall, which delayed the arrival of reinforcements for Prince Ivan’s army. But even then, Prince Ashley was so woefully unprepared for war that West Rolmund’s army still had its hands full. Prince Ashley had sent multiple messengers to try and negotiate, but Prince Ivan and Prince Woroy had turned them all back. I gathered Ser Lekomya and the other palace nobles who were part of Eleora’s faction for a meeting. I needed to brief them before the war began in earnest.

“Gentlemen, this is the perfect opportunity for you to become landed nobles.” I flashed them a wicked grin, the same wicked grin I’d just spent an hour practicing in front of the mirror, and hyped them up. “If we can defeat the rebel army, their nobles’ lands will be confiscated. And Prince Ashley will no doubt grant those lands to the nobles who aided him most in this war.”

Everyone wanted to be granted land so that they and their families could take it easy, so they hung on to my every word. *Perfect, I've got them listening.* Lord Peiti looked hesitantly up at me and asked, "But if Prince Ivan manages to take the throne, won't we become the traitors?"

"If he wins, the Originia and Kastoniev families will take up arms to put down the rebel that stole the crown from the Schwerin family."

We'd have a pretext to fight against the Doneiks. However...it was debatable whether or not we had the numbers to win. I didn't know exactly how large the rebel army was, but if all of North Rolmund's lords were supporting Prince Ivan, it might be as large as 100,000 men. Since this was the off-season for farmers, Prince Ivan could conscript all the able-bodied men he wanted. Though if he really had raised an army that large, he'd run into food and funding problems if the war dragged on. Furthermore, he'd need to leave soldiers behind to protect his castle. I doubted we'd actually end up facing off against an army of 100,000.

"Well, it'll definitely be easier if Prince Ashley manages to win against the rebel army. Which is why we should aid him."

"You have a point. In that case, we'll start preparing for battle. Most of us can scrounge up a few fighters from within our pool of servants."

Lord Peiti nodded at me. *I'm glad these guys are quick on the uptake.* Most of the palace nobles supporting Eleora had no land and barely any troops, but they'd been taught from a young age how to fight. They were worth far more than conscripted farmers.

While I was getting everyone ready to fight, Prince Woroy's vanguard started marching south with a large army. It numbered 40,000 strong. According to the reports I'd received, he'd assimilated the members of the regular Imperial army that had been stationed there. Meanwhile, Prince Ashley had an army of 30,000 supporting him. It was comprised of a mix of conscripts sent from various West Rolmund lords, the palace guard, the capital's own guard, and a few knight orders belonging to the Sonnenlicht Order. Both sides were fielding an army smaller than the total amount they could muster.

Prince Woroy's army managed to push back Prince Ashley's forces, and a few

minor lords whose lands sat on the border of West and North Rolmund capitulated to Prince Woroy. He was making steady progress toward the capital. The entire time I remained neutral, claiming that I was just an ambassador from Meraldia. Borsche returned from Fort Novesk with new messages every few days, and whenever he did, he'd give the nobles fighting for Eleora a training session.

"Now then, it's time for another drill. Like last time, your mission is to capture a fort sitting on a mountain, but this time you have no information about the enemy's numbers. What's the first thing you should do?"

Under Borsche's watchful gaze, the young nobles scrutinized the map in front of them. He was old enough to be all of their fathers, so they treated him with respect.

"Hmm... Scouting is the most important thing, right?"

"It is indeed. How would you go about scouting out the enemy forces?"

"Maybe send a small force up the mountain slope to probe their defenses?"

Borsche shook his head.

"That may be necessary in some situations, but there's a safer and more efficient way to scout." Borsche pointed to a river at the foot of the mountain. "You could send soldiers to keep an eye on this river. Supplying mountain forts is difficult, and oftentimes soldiers stationed there will need to draw water from nearby rivers if their well doesn't provide enough. You can estimate the number of troops stationed in a fort by seeing how much water they need to draw from the river, and how often. If you're lucky, you may even be able to gain control of the river and cut off their supply. Failing that, you might be able to capture a soldier and interrogate them."

"I see, you target their water supply..."

"But Sir Borsche, during wintertime couldn't the enemy soldiers melt nearby snow for their water if the river is cut off?"

Only a noble would ask something like that, I thought to myself.

"Melting snow provides less water than you would think. Furthermore, it

requires burning precious firewood,” Borsche replied.

“I see.”

“I never thought about it, but firewood is an important resource too.”

“I guess we just don’t think about this kind of stuff normally...”

The nobles started writing down notes. They never wanted for water, or firewood, or charcoal, so they’d never realize these kinds of things unless you told them. To be honest, I’d been the same before I reincarnated. But life in the werewolf village had taught me just how grueling a process it was going out, picking up burnable wood, then chopping and drying it.

Their lack of experience aside, the nobles had all at least been tutored in the art of war. They’d make for capable commanders. All we needed were soldiers for them to command. Unfortunately, all I could do was hope that Eleora and Lord Kastoniev pulled through. I was starting to get a little worried, since in a few more days we’d probably get wrapped up into the conflict. We wouldn’t be able to stay neutral for much longer.

About 50 kilometers north of Schwerin, the imperial capital, was a vast plain known as Nodgrad. It was there that Prince Ashley had decided to finally make a stand. Until now, he’d been retreating in the face of Prince Woroy’s steady advance. As a result, all of the nobles between Nodgrad and North Rolmund’s border had capitulated to Prince Woroy. Because there hadn’t been any decisive engagements, the two armies’ numbers remained unchanged. It was still 40,000 versus 30,000. You’d never see a battle on this large a scale in Meraldia.

“We’ve got a good view here.”

I’d set up camp on a nearby mountain and was watching the plains through my telescope. I was far enough away that it felt like I was on a picnic. In fact, I’d even made a tiny snow hut because I’d had so much free time.

“Veight, this is way too dangerous.”

Kite wrapped his coat around himself as he admonished me. He was shivering inside the snow hut I’d made. I brushed off the snow that had gathered on my

head and tossed some dried meat to him.

“Don’t worry, no one’ll find us here. Just eat some meat and relax.”

Kite looked down at the piece of jerky in his hands and sighed.

“I can’t believe you have an appetite even though we’re right next to an enemy army.”

“This isn’t your first time scouting out an enemy army. Get used to it already.”

“Except this time both sides are against us, aren’t they? If we get spotted there’ll be seventy thousand people trying to kill us.”

“It’s fine, I’m here with you.”

I smiled at Kite and he fell silent. The only guards I’d brought with me were the members of Hamaam’s squad. They were used to covert operations, so they were the best bodyguards to bring on a trip like this. I chewed on my breakfast of jerky and observed the two armies’ battle formations. Prince Woroy put his spearmen in the center, while his cavalry made up the bulk of the two flanks. In the rear, he had a few longbowmen and Blast Cane wielders. *I guess he’s planning on having the spearmen take the brunt of Prince Ashley’s attack and look for an opening to send his cavalry in to wreak havoc.*

On the other hand, Prince Ashley put his cavalry directly behind his spearmen. From the looks of it, he was planning on having the spearmen cut open a path, then sending the cavalry in to cut through Prince Woroy’s formation. Instead of longbowmen, he was using crossbowmen for supporting fire.

“Prince Ashley’s army doesn’t have any longbowmen.”

Kite stopped trying to bite through the hard jerky and looked up at me.

“Yeah, only a few lords bother training longbowmen... Veight, what the heck is this meat made of?”

“It’s horse meat.”

“Seriously?”

Kite pulled the meat out of his mouth and I gave him a puzzled look.

“What’s wrong?”

“I-Is horse...edible?”

Of course. Horse-meat sashimi is pretty good, you know? I ignored Kite’s question and turned back to the two armies. Ashley’s army was both smaller in number and not as well-trained. Crossbows had a lot of penetrating power, and it was easy to teach soldiers how to use them, but they couldn’t keep up a rapid volley the way longbowmen could. In a plains battle like this, longbowmen were superior. Furthermore, Prince Ashley himself wasn’t the one leading this army.

“Prince Ashley remained in the capital, right?”

“Ah, yeah. Marquis Toskin is commanding his army. He’s a distant relative of Prince Ashley’s.”

His rank was sufficient for leadership, but the question was whether he had the ability to lead.

“Veight, is it bad that Prince Ashley didn’t come himself?”

“Well, it’s not good for morale. Plus this means he won’t actually be here to witness the outcome of the battle, which is bad.”

“Oh yeah. Bosses who give orders without any idea of what’s actually going on are the worst.”

It looked like I’d accidentally dredged up some bad memories of when Kite was still working for the Senate.

“Well, in Ashley’s case, he’s the only male member of the Schwerin line. If he dies, there’s no successor to take his place. Meanwhile the Doneiks family has Prince Ivan, Prince Woroy, and Prince Ryuunie.”

Even if one of the Doneiks princes was killed in battle, the family itself could keep fighting. Which was why Prince Woroy could afford to command at the front lines. *Still, has that guy not figured out that Prince Ivan was behind the assassination? No, despite how he looks, he’s a sharp guy. He knows his brother killed his dad, and he’s choosing to follow him anyway... Hmm, I might be able to use this information.*

Soon enough, the two armies finished deploying their formations.

Messengers from both sides headed into the no man's land and exchanged something. My guess was that this was the ritual exchange of contracts that happened before any battle between Rolmund forces. Rolmund was so in love with custom and tradition that armies were required to draft up war contracts and exchange them before battle. Without this exchange, the battle wouldn't be seen as legitimate by the other nobles. Of course the contracts only served a ritualistic purpose, and no one cared if either army actually abided by the terms of their contract.

Once both messengers had returned to their respective camps, drums sounded and trumpets blared, and the two sides charged each other.

"It's like I'm listening to an outdoor concert."

"I imagine you're the only person who's likened the trumpets and drums of war to a concert, Veight."

I realized I wasn't as nervous as everyone else here, but we'd really only come to watch so there shouldn't be any danger. Prince Woroy's army was comprised of the forces of a bunch of different nobles, but it was surprisingly cohesive. The spearmen were all marching in sync. They looked well-trained as well, and they knew how to not get in the way of the archers supporting them from the rear. On the other hand, Prince Ashley's army was a mess.

"Uhh, is it just me or is that one platoon over there not moving?"

Indeed, one of Prince Ashley's spear platoons hadn't moved from its starting spot. After thinking about it for a second, I replied, "I think the sounds of the trumpets aren't reaching them. They're upwind, and the sound is traveling downwind."

Considering how large the army was, it wasn't surprising that you'd have issues like this. The units next to the spear platoon weren't moving in tandem with the rest of the army either. Their progress was slow, since they weren't sure if they were supposed to be advancing or not. Everyone's pace was all over the place. In the end, Prince Ashley's front line was still a disorganized mob by the time Prince Woroy's vanguard crashed into them. In a battle between lines of spearmen like this, what was most important was maintaining formation. Because Prince Ashley's side couldn't do that, they started slowly getting

pushed back.

“It’s over,” I muttered. Still trying to chew through his jerky, Kite looked up and asked, “Already?”

“Prince Ashley’s side picked the wrong formation. Even though his spearmen are struggling, Toskin can’t send anyone in to reinforce them.”

Toskin had arrayed his cavalry directly behind his spearmen and now his own men were obstructing his cavalry’s charge. Furthermore, crossbows were bad at high-angle fire, so Toskin’s spearmen got in the way of their covering fire too.

“I’ve seen this happen dozens of times in Shogi.”

“What’s Shogi?”

“Sorry, I meant to say Shougo.”

Whoops. I’d been thinking of Shogi games where a player’s own pawns blocked the advance of his rook. Toskin’s trumpeters and drummers hurriedly changed the beat they were playing, trying to signal the infantry to reform.

It seemed he was trying to make a path for his cavalry to charge and hit Prince Woroy’s lines where they were thin. As a result, his spearmen had to part to either side. Unfortunately, the battle up front had become so chaotic that his orders weren’t reaching everyone. Furthermore, some units were so hard-pressed that they couldn’t move even if they wanted to. But because of that, the units that were able to move ended up crashing into their own allies, sowing confusion and chaos.

Some units were so startled by their allies suddenly appearing that they mistook them for enemies and retreated. As Toskin’s lines grew more disorganized, Prince Woroy pushed his advantage.

“Oof, this is pretty one-sided.”

Kite raised his eyebrows, and I shook my head sadly.

“That’s what happens when you try to direct an army on a large scale. Especially when it’s a hodgepodge mix of forces from various nobles. From time immemorial, the biggest problem strategists have faced is getting their armies to respond swiftly to orders.”

People were still accidentally bombing or shooting their allies back on Earth, so I wasn't expecting this world to have communication figured out. I felt bad for Prince Ashley's army, but of course Prince Woroy didn't. He pushed his advantage further and had his spearmen wedge their way into Toskin's formation. Before long, Toskin's front line was in shambles and his spearmen started to flee. It was then that the platoon that had stayed behind finally started to move. Even though they couldn't hear the drums or trumpets, it was obvious their allies were in danger so they'd gone to help. Despite the fact that their army was on the back foot, the platoon nevertheless charged bravely forward. Unfortunately, they just made things even worse.

"Veight, that platoon's getting hammered..."

I sighed as I watched the scene play out through my telescope.

"They picked the worst time to charge."

Prince Ashley's army was in such a state of confusion that they'd mistaken the platoon for an enemy unit and was now attacking them. They weren't even looking at the platoon's flags, or the crests on the soldier's armor. Prince Ashley's army lost a good chunk of their forces, mostly to their own allies. It was painful to watch. Worse, the rest of Prince Ashley's army could do nothing to stop it. They were trapped.

It was then that Prince Woroy's cavalry wings converged onto the hapless spearmen. I'd only discovered this after reincarnating, but for a foot soldier, there was nothing more terrifying to deal with than a cavalry charge. When Prince Ashley's spearmen saw the cavalry coming, their morale plummeted. Realizing his army couldn't fight any longer, Toskin ordered the retreat. The trumpeters blared the retreat signal.

"In the first place, why the hell did he put his cavalry there? Didn't he realize that'd make them hard to maneuver?"

Kite replied, "Oh, now I remember. The guy who's commanding Prince Ashley's army, Marquis Toskin, has a son who's a captain in the Imperial Cavalry."

"Ahh, I see now. He probably put the cavalry somewhere safe because he didn't want his son getting hurt."

There was no way to know for sure if that was the reason or not, but either way, it was the biggest contributing factor to Toskin's loss. He couldn't afford to be playing favorites when his army was already at a numbers disadvantage. I watched as Prince Ashley's army was routed, then turned to Kite with a smile.

"Let's head back. Prince Woroy's troops will come here as soon as the battle's over. We should get out of here."

"Ah, what do you want to do about this snow hut?"

"Leave it as is. It'll serve as proof that I was here."

Knowing Prince Woroy, he'd immediately realize the mysterious observer had been me. In order to make doubly sure he realized it was me, I drew my dueling saber and thrust it into the ground. I wanted to prove that I'd been watching the battle, so that Prince Woroy knew I hadn't participated in it. That way he'd know Eleora's faction was still neutral and, more importantly, that it was interested in seeing how the conflict between Prince Ivan and Prince Ashley progressed. *Now then, let's see what terms both sides offer us.*

"Kite, were you keeping track of everything that happened?"

"Yep. I've memorized everything, including the movements both armies took. When we get back I'll write it all down in a report for you."

"Perfect. Let's go back, make some tea, and call everyone over for a war council."

"Some hot tea definitely sounds good right now."

Kite nodded, shivering in the cold.

Prince Ashley's army suffered severe casualties at the battle of Nodgrad. They'd lost around 5,000 men, though that included the deserters and soldiers who'd been captured by the enemy as well, so it wasn't all casualties. On the other hand, Prince Woroy barely even lost 1,000 men. Since his army had started out 40,000 strong, a loss that small was like a drop in a bucket.

"But Prince Ashley's army hasn't been annihilated yet, right?" Lacy asked, bringing over a tray of fresh, hot tea. I took a sip to warm myself and replied,

“Sure, but what would the numbers look like if the two armies fought again now?”

Lacy did some quick mental arithmetic.

“It’d be thirty-nine thousand against twenty-five thousand, right? Oh... That’s bad.”

I nodded.

“Yep, there’d be an even bigger discrepancy. And if they were losing when the gap was smaller, there’s no way they’ll start winning now.”

“I see...”

Of course both sides were capable of recruiting more troops, and Prince Ashley’s army wouldn’t be stupid enough to try the same tactics twice. But that didn’t change the fact that the situation didn’t look good for them. According to Ser Lekomya’s reports, Prince Ashley had ordered his men to abandon the plains and start fortifying the nearby castles. He wanted to turn this into a defensive battle. I took a bite of the scone Lacy had brought me with the tea and told her, “Prince Ashley’s army is planning on holing up in their castles to make up for the difference in numbers. Normally, when you want to lay siege to a castle, you need three to five times as many troops as the castle you’re besieging.”

“You need that many!?”

“That’s what I’ve heard, at least. I’m not an expert on siege warfare by any means. The attacking side has to camp out in the open, and they have to constantly be wary of sorties from the castle.”

Kite interrupted me and muttered, “But can’t the attacking side just surround the castle and starve the defending side out?”

“Yeah, starvation tactics can work. But if the attacking side’s not careful, they’ll end up running out of food first.”

Since Prince Woroy’s army would be wading into enemy territory, they wouldn’t be able to requisition food from the locals.

“Anyway, we can let the concerned parties figure out how they’ll fight. Right

now is the perfect chance to sell Eleora's troops for a high price."

Lord Kastoniev had done a great job of rallying the East Rolmund nobles, and he now had a sizable army at his command. It was about 15,000 men strong. Of those 15,000 men, 3,000 were Lord Kastoniev's personal troops, while 4,000 belonged to the Originia family that Eleora was part of. While the army wasn't large enough to declare itself as a third force in this power struggle, it was large enough to tip the scales in favor of whoever it sided with.

A messenger from the palace arrived while I was trying to decide which side to join. It seemed Prince Ashley was the first to ask Eleora for aid. As Eleora's representative, I decided to speak with the messenger over lunch.

Let's start with a gentle reminder.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Princess Eleora has no interest in the throne. Her position in the line of succession is too low."

"Y-Yes, of course I'm aware."

The messenger Prince Ashley had sent, Baron something or the other, wiped sweat off his brow. I nodded, satisfied, and added, "For this reason, Her Highness has only raised the minimum number of troops necessary to protect herself. I suspect our forces will be of little use to you, but..."

I was purposely playing dumb, implying that because Eleora had no interest in the throne she also had no soldiers. As I expected, the messenger started to panic a little.

"But Prince Ivan's tyranny must be stopped! If this continues, the people of Rolmund will suffer! For the sake of peace within the empire, please ask Princess Eleora to help suppress the rebel army!"

"I'm afraid you've put me in a difficult position."

I wasn't really in a difficult position at all, but I furrowed my brow anyway. So far, the Doneiks side hadn't sent us any messengers. Eleora and the Doneiks family weren't on terribly good terms, so I guess it made sense that they wouldn't come asking for cooperation now. After all, the late Lord Doneiks had tried to assassinate her, meaning we'd end up siding with Prince Ashley no

matter what. The question was, how much could we get out of the alliance? Unless Prince Ashley was well and truly cornered, we wouldn't be rewarded too much for helping him. But if we waited too long and he became pressed so hard there was no hope of recovery, our troops alone wouldn't be enough to save him. Right now seemed like the perfect balance between those two points, but I wanted to be sure.

"Where is Prince Ashley right now?"

The messenger bowed his head apologetically.

"My humblest apologies. Prince Ashley would have preferred to have met with you in person, but he is currently busy with strategy meetings and the like." He lowered his voice and added, "The castle Earl Ryaag was holding, Sveniki Castle, has just fallen. Publicly we're claiming that Prince Woroy's army captured it but in truth...the earl was a spy for the Doneiks faction. Right now His Highness is checking to make sure the remaining members of his faction are loyal."

Kite, who was standing behind me, casually mentioned, "Earl Ryaag was one of Prince Ashley's chief retainers, Lord Veight."

The Doneiks family had probably used one of their usual schemes to get the earl to defect. It had been well worth the risk though, since not only had they obtained a castle without fighting, they'd also dealt a psychological blow to the Ashley faction. *If even his trusted retainers are abandoning him, Prince Ashley might be done for already. Especially if that guy who betrayed him leaked vital information.* Chances were, that was what Prince Ashley's supporters were thinking. Granted, I was starting to get worried too. Pretending to look conflicted I muttered, "Isn't Sveniki Castle only a half day's march from the capital?"

If it was in Prince Woroy's hands now, he could use it as a base to attack the capital. Even if we repelled him, his troops would only be retreating a short distance away. *Damn, at this rate Prince Ashley might actually lose.* While I'd already decided to join Prince Ashley's side, I didn't want to sell our army for less than what it was worth. Especially since I'd be exposing Eleora's allies to danger. Sighing, I shook my head.

“If the situation is already this dire, I’m afraid I will have to advise Princess Eleora that joining Prince Ashley’s cause would be too dangerous.”

“Surely you’re not serious!?”

The messenger paled. Without a moment’s delay, I continued, “However, I also believe that it is Prince Ashley who is fighting on the side of justice. As a Meraldian, I do not wish to ally my country to a Rolmund Empire ruled by someone unjust. Our allies must be noble and trustworthy.”

The messenger’s face instantly brightened.

“Th-Then...”

I nodded.

“I will ask Princess Eleora to aid you.”

“Thank you so much!”

The messenger bowed his head. It was time for the finisher.

“However, if we are to fight, then we must win. Is that not so?”

“B-But of course...”

I grinned at the messenger and said, “Which is why I would like to request that we fight not under Prince Ashley’s command, but rather under Princess Eleora’s command. We will ally ourselves with you, but we will not become part of your army.”

“M-May I ask why?”

Because your prince sucks at warfare and we want to be free to fight our way. Of course, I couldn’t say that, so I came up with some other excuse.

“Princess Eleora’s army is made up primarily of mage corps. Utilizing them effectively requires specialized knowledge that only Princess Eleora possesses.”

Honestly, my logic was mostly bullshit, but the important thing was giving a reason. That way I had an excuse to say no to the alliance if the messenger refused my demand. Prince Ashley’s life was on the line here, so I was pretty sure the messenger wouldn’t quibble about trivial details like who was in command. Just in case though, I added, “Having Princess Eleora command our

forces is necessary for victory. Is this condition acceptable to you?”

This way Eleora would be fighting not as one of Prince Ashley’s soldiers, but rather as an equally important member of a joint alliance. My plan was to vastly expand Eleora’s influence in the chaos that would follow the suppression of the rebel army. The messenger considered my conditions for a few minutes, then wiped the sweat off his brow and replied, “I don’t have the authority to make a decision like this, so may I please return to P-Prince Ashley and inform him of your conditions?”

“Of course.”

I smiled as reassuringly as I could. That evening, Prince Ashley sent the royal family’s personal carriage to come take me to the castle.

Awed by how ostentatious the carriage was, I sat in silence as it bore me to the palace. The fact that Prince Ashley had sent his personal carriage to get me showed he knew just how vital Eleora’s assistance was. The thing was like a portable vault of jewels though, and I just couldn’t calm down while inside it. I was ushered into Prince Ashley’s study, and he smiled cordially as I walked in.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Lord Veight.”

At first glance, his smile looked the same as always, but upon closer inspection, I realized the Prince of Flowers looked quite stressed. There was something gloomy about his smile, too. When he realized I’d seen through him his smile vanished and he offered me a seat.

“Please, sit. I’d like to skip the formalities and get straight to discussing the—”

Prince Ashley suddenly staggered, and I rushed over to support him.

“Are you alright?”

“Y-Yes. My apologies. And thank you.”

He’s even more exhausted than he looks. I sat him down on a nearby sofa to let him rest. I also called over a maid and asked her to bring something warm to drink.

“Your Highness, you look overworked. Please, rest.”

“I’m afraid I cannot afford to rest while the empire is in crisis.”

Prince Ashley leaned back into the sofa and smiled wearily at me. Somehow he still managed to look handsome while doing that. I was starting to think it had less to do with his looks, and more to do with his upbringing. I sipped the herb tea Prince Ashley’s maid brought us and gestured for him to return to the main topic. He nodded and said, “I would like to form an alliance with Eleora in order to overcome this current crisis.”

“You’re willing to accept that she’ll be on equal standing with you?”

This one point was very important. Prince Ashley nodded.

“Of course. I have not yet formally been crowned emperor. As such, I have no right to give orders to Eleora. But if I don’t defeat Prince Ivan’s armies, I’ll have a bag on my head instead of a crown.”

In Rolmund, criminals slated to be executed had bags put over their heads before they were killed. *He must be in a really tight spot if he’s talking about his own death.* Rolmundians never stopped terrifying me. But now wasn’t the time for me to be afraid. I needed to play the villain again.

“Fear not, Your Highness. I shall send a messenger to Princess Eleora at once. She should be able to bring her armies here immediately.” Keeping my tone gentle, I lightly probed the prince. “Since you were kind enough to accept my demands, I imagine Princess Eleora will have no qualms about aiding you. However, are you sure about this?”

Prince Ashley nodded.

“I am. Considering the situation, I have no reason to refuse your conditions. Especially not when it will bring me thirty thousand soldiers.”

30,000? We’ve only got 15,000 though... After a second thought, it clicked. If Eleora chose to join Prince Ivan instead, Prince Ashley would have an extra 15,000 soldiers to deal with. On the other hand, if she joined him, not only would he not have to fight another 15,000 men, he’d have that many new men added to his own. So scoring an alliance with Eleora was equivalent to gaining 30,000 men.

Looks like you do understand just how vital Eleora is to this conflict. While I

was impressed by Prince Ashley's insight, I chuckled to myself. It seemed he was willing to buy Eleora's soldiers for more than they were worth. *If that's how you want it, I have no reason to haggle you down.*

I continued discussing affairs with Prince Ashley, and it appeared the situation was worse than I thought. Most of his supporters were nobles who'd chosen to follow him simply because he was the crown prince. They'd figured they wouldn't have to do anything for Ashley to succeed the throne. But Earl Toskin's defeat at Nodgrad had shaken them.

On the other hand, Prince Ivan's supporters had followed the Doneiks family for a long time, and their loyalty was firm. They all ruled lands in the northernmost tip of an already northern empire, and the harsh cold had forced them to work together for generations. On top of that, they were supporting a rebellion, so they knew there was no turning back for them.

Not only was there a stark difference in the support Prince Ashley and Prince Ivan had, there was a huge difference in their armies. I sipped my second cup of herb tea and smiled at Prince Ashley.

"You won't be able to weather the cold wind coming in from the north by relying on fairweather friends."

"Oh, I know. But this battle is my responsibility. I plan to see it through until the very end."

It seemed Prince Ashley was prepared to fight to the death, despite knowing most of the nobles in his camp were just opportunists. If only he was a better tactician, he might even have had a chance. He'd only heard secondhand reports about the defeat at Nodgrad, so he had no idea why it is he'd actually lost. The generals had all fudged their reports to show them in a better light, since they didn't want to get demoted. *You should have sent an impartial observer to watch over the battle.* Prince Ashley smiled sadly at me.

"I should have spent as much time studying military strategy as I did studying agriculture and medicine. I know nothing of leading armies. When I was young, my uncle...Lord Doneiks came to the palace and renovated that greenhouse for me, so I ended up spending my time studying topics related to it."

“It’s possible that was exactly what Lord Doneiks intended.”

Prince Ashley nodded.

“You may be right. But because I followed the path my uncle laid out for me, I was able to enjoy a relatively peaceful life. Avoiding military affairs entirely was part of the reason I was able to succeed as a prince.”

“I see.”

But as a result, there was now no force capable of rivaling the Doneiks army. I had no doubt that old fox was smirking at us from the afterlife. Unfortunately for him, so long as the Doneiks family was planning a potential invasion of Meraldia, I’d be there to stop them.

“Prince Ashley, leave the fighting to us. The men I brought with me from Meraldia are skilled in special operations, and each of them is as strong as a hundred men. Most importantly though, the fact that you have Meraldia’s support is proof that your cause is just. The nobles whose support in you is wavering will surely pledge themselves wholeheartedly to your cause now.”

“That’s reassuring to hear. As a reward for helping me suppress this rebellion, I intend to give Meraldia more favorable terms during negotiations.”

Actually, my reward will be making sure you guys stop interfering with Meraldia entirely. That being said, future dealings with Prince Ashley would be a lot easier if he was in my debt. This was also a good opportunity to showcase the strength of Meraldia’s forces.

“Your Highness, what do you intend to do about Sveniki Castle?”

“So you’ve already heard about that. That castle is my biggest concern right now.”

Sveniki Castle guarded the highway that ran between Schwerin and the north. It was a small castle that lay on an open plain, but it’d still be difficult to recapture once Prince Woroy made it his base.

“With how close the castle is to the capital, the rebel army is capable of striking before Eleora’s reinforcements arrive. I want to retake it, but my generals are divided on who to send to do it.”

No one wanted to be the one to offer to take on such a dangerous mission, and Prince Ashley's generals didn't know who else might be a traitor. The simplest solution would be to have Prince Ashley appoint someone, but he knew next to nothing about warfare. This was a perfect opportunity for me. I grinned and said, "I brought fifty of my soldiers with me to the capital. We can retake Sveniki Castle for you."



Stunned, Prince Ashley got up from the sofa.

“That’s far too reckless! ...Can you really do it?”

Prince Ashley was half-suspicious, half-hopeful. Heart pounding, I said as confidently as I could, “If I did not believe it possible, I wouldn’t have suggested it to you. Leave this matter to me, Your Highness, and await the good news.”

Oh yeah, I almost forgot to mention the most important thing.

“While my men will be sufficient to retake the castle, I will need some of your troops to hold it. May I borrow a few members of your reserves?”

“Of course. Take as many members of my Imperial Guard as you need. Feel free to use them as you see fit.”

What a generous prince. I guess he’s trying to show me how nice he is to his allies. It was very much like him not to quibble about small concessions, though. If he was willing to be this generous, I might as well take advantage of it.

“Thank you very much. I don’t plan to use them until after the castle’s fallen, so I will hopefully be able to return them to you intact.”

I got to my feet and Prince Ashley’s curiosity finally got the better of him.

“Lord Veight, what manner of strategy do you plan to employ?”

He took the bait. I turned back to him with a smile.

“In war, there are times when a general cannot afford to give his liege answers. By which I mean, it’s a secret.”

The next morning, I set out to conquer Sveniki Castle. First, I sent them a message asking them to surrender. When that didn’t work, I returned to my base where I found Fahn waiting for me.

“How’d it go?”

“They threatened to shoot me.”

I’d gone in person to ask them to surrender. But when Earl Ryaag saw me, he’d gone pale and started shouting threats. I hadn’t been able to negotiate at all. Kite, who’d come with me, took out his notepad with a sigh.

“Can’t say I’m surprised, though. At this point, even if he returned to Prince Ashley’s camp he’d still be punished.”

“Yeah. Even if he surrendered now, he’d definitely have his lands confiscated. Hell, he’ll be lucky to escape execution. I knew he wouldn’t surrender.”

Fahn cocked her head.

“Then why’d you go to ask him to surrender?”

She handed me a mug of wine. Right now, we were camped out in a nearby mountain. We couldn’t light a fire or we’d be spotted, so the only way to warm ourselves up was with alcohol. I took a sip of wine and smiled at Fahn.

“To make breaching the castle easier. Kite, you memorized the layout of the front gates, right?”

“Ah, yeah. They have a drawbridge and two iron portcullises. The biggest obstacle will be the two watchtowers flanking the gates. I saw a lot of archers stationed in each.”

Kite showed me the rough sketch of the main gates that he’d drawn in his notebook. Though we’d barely had a chance to glance at it before we’d been brought into the castle, he’d noted almost every detail.

“I can’t believe you managed to get all of that.”

“Most castles are built the same way. A bit of epoch magic and some guesswork is enough to get a general idea of the layout.”

I kept forgetting this, but he had been one of the Senate’s elite mages. I took the notebook from Kite and handed it to Jerrick.

“Our goal is to bring down this gate and leave the castle defenseless. I want you to find a way to blow the thing apart. Hamaam’s squad will guard you while you do it.”

Jerrick took one look at the sketch, then grinned.

“You got it, boss. A crappy gate like this wouldn’t even stand up against a battering ram. And we can make sure the drawbridge stays down by cutting the chains. I’ve got all the tools I need for this.”

According to Jerrick, all the castles in Rolmund were built to defend only against humans, and they hadn't accounted for demons or monsters. It made sense, since it had been centuries since Rolmund had last seen a monster or demon. Still, that didn't change the fact that specializing in human warfare made them susceptible to werewolf tactics. *Alright Ryaag, you didn't surrender when I asked nicely, so I hope you're ready for an ass-kicking.*

Once the sun set, I gathered my werewolf squad together.

"Jerrick and Hamaam, your squads are in charge of destroying the castle gates. The rest of you, take out any lookouts. If you can't keep the alarm from being sounded, start going on a rampage to draw attention."

A shiver of anticipation ran through the werewolves. I decided to get all the important details out of the way before they got too amped up to listen.

"We'll use the dog whistles to keep in contact, but if stealth fails and you guys need to fight, you can start using howls. There won't be any need to hold back then."

"You're sure? We can kill everyone?"

Monza gave me a pleading look. She really enjoyed killing way too much. But for once, I nodded.

"We're mounting an assault in unfamiliar territory using tactics we're not used to. We can't afford to hold back. If we're not careful, we'll be the ones to die instead."

I didn't have the time to pick a more efficient strategy. Ryaag had refused to surrender, and now he would have to face the consequences.

"If anyone in your squad gets injured, call me immediately. I don't want anyone dying here. Now let's move out!"

"Roger!"

All of us transformed and bounded across the snowy plain. Sveniki Castle had been built on the plains as a matter of convenience, so it wasn't a very defensible castle. Once we were close to the castle, we detoured into a nearby

forest and met up with the advance party, which consisted of Lacy and her guards. When she saw us she nodded to me. It seemed things had gone well on her end. I turned to my werewolves and said, “Lacy’s cast her illusion all the way from this tree to those boulders. As long as we’re inside it, the soldiers won’t be able to see us. Make sure you stay in single-file, or you’ll end up wandering outside the spell’s range.”

Lacy’s illusion was only about five meters wide, but it would let us approach the castle without being spotted. Sweat beaded on Lacy’s forehead as she struggled to keep her magic going.

“I wanted to make it wider, but creating an illusion that hides anything inside it from all angles is harder than it seems...”

“No normal illusion mage could pull something like that off. You’re definitely worthy of calling yourself a disciple of the Great Sage Gomoviroa.”

“Ehehe.”

Once we made it to the castle, the rest would be easy. Both the moat and the castle’s walls weren’t designed to stop werewolves. The moat was narrow enough that we could leap across it and the walls were uneven enough that we could easily climb them. Rolmund’s oldest castles had been designed to prevent monster and demon raids as well, but Sveniki Castle was full of openings.

We split into our respective squads and began our assault. As soon as we destroyed the gates, I was planning on having the 7,000 men Prince Ashley had lent me storm the castle. Sveniki Castle had barely 2,000 troops stationed inside it, so once the gates were gone Ryaag didn’t stand a chance. While Jerrick was hard at work sabotaging the gates, I went to complete my own mission. When I’d met with Ryaag earlier in the afternoon, I’d memorized his scent. The scent led me to the window of his study. I canceled my transformation and fixed up my clothes. I then snuck in through the window and stared at the earl. He was a plump, middle-aged man, and was currently dozing by the hearth.

“Good evening, Earl Ryaag.”

“I recognize that voice!”

Ryaag woke up instantly and whirled around. I gave him a sarcastic bow.

“I have come here this evening not as a messenger, but as your enemy. Please surrender. This is your final warning. If you refuse, I shall slay you in single combat.”

Seeing my lack of armor, Ryaag hurriedly grabbed the rapier hanging on his wall.

“How did you get in here!?”

“From the window.”

“This is the third floor!”

Yeah, I can jump that high. As Ryaag fell into a stance I said, “So, you refuse to surrender. Are you prepared to fight then?”

“Of course! Don’t think I’ll let you leave here alive, you dueling maniac!”

“You must be joking.”

With that, I transformed. Ryaag’s eyes nearly popped out of his skull as he saw my werewolf form.

“What!?”

I leapt forward and closed the gap between me and the earl in an instant. I thrust my claws into his throat, and he died before he even had a chance to scream.

“I told you I would take your life if you refused to surrender.”

It was bad luck that he’d ended up having to fight a werewolf, but honestly it was probably better that he had been slain in combat rather than executed as a traitor. *I hope you don’t resent me for this.*

“Lord Ryaag, what’s the matter!?”

“I heard you shout— Waaaaah!?”

“It’s a monster!”

I slew the guards that came running in when they heard the commotion. I couldn’t let anyone who’d seen my true form live. It seemed the other werewolves had gotten started as well, since I could smell blood wafting through the castle. *I hope everyone’s okay.* Just then, I heard Jerrick’s howl from

near the gates.

“Prey down.”

Guess he got the gates too. Perfect timing. Now that the castle was defenseless, there was no point in remaining here. I’d already taken out the castle’s lord, so the garrison’s chain of command was in disarray. They wouldn’t be able to fight back. I lifted my head and howled the retreat signal.

“Hunt complete.”

My squads all howled their acknowledgment of the order. It seemed no one had been hurt. I rendezvoused with Fahn’s squad, who were my guards for this mission, and loped away from Sveniki Castle.

“Bro, how many did you take out?”

“I got eight. How about you?”

“Hah, I got twelve! I finally beat you, bro!”

Splattered in blood, my werewolves gloated about their accomplishments. Naturally, the Garney brothers were the most excited of the lot.

“Hey, Vodd, how many did you get?”

The old white werewolf turned to the Garney brothers with a smile and said, “Dunno... I stopped bothering to count after forty.”

“Forty!?”

Vodd and the other older werewolves guffawed at the shock on the Garney Brothers’ faces. There was more to hunting than physical strength. Us youngsters couldn’t hold a candle to the old veterans. Still, I was amazed old man Vodd managed to take out 40 in that short a time.

Naturally, our own casualties were zero. Ambushing humans in enclosed spaces was our specialty after all. That being said, a few of my werewolves had been injured in the fighting, so I healed them all on the way back.

“Man, that was fun!”

“Yeah, I wish we could let loose like this all the time!”

As my werewolves revelled in the aftermath of the hunt, Rolmund’s Imperial

Guards started marching on the castle. They had perfect timing.

Once we returned to our campsite, I changed into fresh clothes and got onto a horse. From here on out I was back to acting like a human. It didn't really matter who was in command of the Imperial Guards, since our victory was all but guaranteed. However, I needed to take charge so I could hide all evidence that werewolves had attacked the castle before Prince Ashley's men went in.

"I'll go take charge of the human troops. You guys stay here and rest. Kite, Lacy, oh and you too Parker. Sorry, but I need you to come with me."

"You got it, Veight."

"I-I'll do my best!"

"Why is it that I'm being treated as an afterthought!?"

I took my mages with me to meet the army of Imperial Guards.

—Prince Woroy's Fears—

"Did you say Sveniki Castle has fallen?"

I listened in disbelief to my scout's report. I'm camped out in front of one of the castles Ashley's army's holed up in. My plan was to conquer this castle then stop at Sveniki Castle for a rest. Knowing there's no respite even after this battle is going to hit my men's morale hard.

"Your Highness, what should we do?"

"If we can't resupply at Sveniki Castle, our food stores will run out in another few days."

The lords under my command all looked shaken. *This might be bad.* Earl Ryaag, the lord of Sveniki Castle, had always been a supporter of the Doneiks. Dad made him join Ashley's faction as a spy ages ago in case he needed an insider. Only Ivan and I knew that, though. Fortunately, his loyalty had remained with us, and Ryaag had defected to our side right after we crushed

Ashley's army in the field, though it seemed his betrayal had just ended with him getting defeated. *Oh well, it is what it is. If everything went as planned in war, we wouldn't need generals.*

"So who conquered the castle?"

"Lord Veight. He infiltrated the castle with his personal troops and destroyed the front gates."

I should have known it was you. You don't do things by halves, do you?

"What happened to Earl Ryaag?"

"He was slain by Veight."

Bastard, my dad spent a whole decade setting these plots up and you're overturning them all in a day? This is why I'd kept telling Ivan he needed to win Lord Veight over as an ally before going to war. Well, it was too late to change that now.

"Hey, how long until our supply wagons get here?"

"They're coming as fast as they can, but they're still a few days out."

I'd had my army march ahead of the supply wagons to take advantage of our momentum, so my soldiers were only carrying a small number of rations with them. It'd be nice if our supplies arrived on schedule, but if they got delayed, my troops would be fighting on empty stomachs. I could start requisitioning food from nearby villages, but supplies were tight during the winter. If I starved the citizens to feed my army, Dad's soul wouldn't be able to rest in peace.

"Prepare for the worst outcome so you can obtain the best one."

That had been one of my father's favorite sayings. Rushing my army forward had been a mistake. A mistake I needed to rectify right now.

"Cancel the attack on the fortress and sound the retreat! We're going back to Creech Castle!"

"Your Highness, are you sure that's wise!?"

My lords seemed shaken by the decision, but I nodded firmly.

"Even if we take this fortress, there's nothing but enemies ahead of us. Our

supplies aren't here, and we have nowhere we can barricade ourselves to let our troops rest. It's not even large enough to hold everyone."

"You have a point, but if we retreat we'll be going against Prince Ivan's orders!" One of my nobles argued back. To the lords of North Rolmund, the orders of the Doneiks family were absolute. But I was a member of the Doneiks family as well.

"We've hit an unexpected roadblock. If we try to continue with our previous plan, we'll end up defeated for sure. Don't worry, I'll explain things to my brother."

I reassured my nobles and clapped my hands together.

"Now get on with the retreat! Speed is the most vital thing in war. If we take too long we'll be in trouble! Make sure the enemy doesn't realize what we're up to, though, or they'll hound us during our retreat!"

My generals started scurrying to and fro, while a few of the nobles not in command positions walked up to me.

"Your Highness, what if we asked Prince Ivan for reinforcements?"

"If Meraldia's joined Ashley, then this war could get dragged out for a long time. We'll need those men later. Besides, Lord Veight is Princess Eleora's vice-commander. We should assume she has joined Prince Ashley's cause as well."

I'd purposely avoided mentioning that, but it seemed my nobles were worrying about that possibility anyway. *This is definitely not good.* To be honest, I was afraid Eleora had joined Ashley as well, but there was no way to know for sure right now. And really, that was the scariest thing about Lord Veight. You could never tell what he was up to. At first, everyone had just assumed he was some minor diplomat from a conquered nation. But not only was he making a mockery of Rolmund's nobles and doing as he pleased, Eleora wasn't even bothering to rein him in. And now he'd put Ashley in his debt too.

Judging by how much freedom Eleora had given him, he'd definitely made some kind of deal with her. I had no idea what deal exactly, and honestly, I'd prefer to keep Lord Veight's closeness with the members of Rolmund's royalty a secret from the lower-ranking nobles. Still, it was my job to reassure these guys

and keep their morale up.

“Don’t worry. Lord Veight only has a few dozen men with him. And he can’t request any reinforcements from Meraldia until spring at the earliest. We just need to end this war quickly and then negotiate peace with Meraldia.”

Though it was getting harder and harder to bring a swift conclusion to this conflict. *Curse you, Lord Veight.*

“We can leave the diplomacy to my brother. Our job is to make sure we win every battle we fight. Crushing Ashley’s army is the minimum condition we need to meet if we want to win this war. And that’s something we can definitely do!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“We’ll do our best, Your Highness!”

My nobles were finally regaining their morale. *Good grief.* Though even if I could keep their morale up, we might still need reinforcements. Eleora was a skilled general, and her uncle Lord Kastoniev had a lot of influence. He’d be able to raise a lot of troops for her.

“They’ll probably have around ten...no, fifteen thousand men.”

“Is something the matter, Prince Woroy?”

“Nah, I’m just talking to myself.”

I couldn’t let my men find out they suddenly had 15,000 more enemies to fight. At least not yet. *Guess I have no other choice. It’ll make things harder for Ivan, but I think I need him to conscript more troops for me. I’ll need more food, too.* I called over the army’s scribe.

“I need you to write a letter to my brother asking for reinforcements. It’s fine if they’re just infantry, but I need another twenty thousand men.”

“Yes, sir!”

I stepped out of my tent and looked southward. *You win this time, Astral Fencer. I’ll retreat for now. But next time I’ll bring you down. Just you wait.*

The unstoppable march of Prince Woroy's army came to a stop the day after I retook Sveniki Castle. Prince Woroy took his army back to Creech Castle, where he fortified his men. I wasn't sure why retaking Sveniki Castle convinced him to retreat, but it had. His retreat had been so swift that the troops guarding the castle he'd been sieging hadn't even had time to react. One of the men who'd been fighting there came here to give his report.

"The arrows suddenly stopped, and by the time we thought to look out the window, they were already gone."

What are they, ghosts? The detachments Prince Woroy had sent out to siege other castles had all retreated as well. They'd completely pulled back their battle lines. As I was pondering why they'd do that, Prince Ashley turned to me and said, "Thank you so very much, Lord Veight. Because of you, we were able to weather Woroy's assault."

"Don't mention it. I just did what little I could."

Prince Ashley smiled ruefully.

"If conquering a castle with such a small force is a 'little' achievement then you are undoubtedly a god of war."

I mean, I just used werewolves to overwhelm a couple of guards. Anyone could do that if they had my men. If anything, my werewolves deserved all the praise for carrying out my reckless orders. I smiled awkwardly at Prince Ashley, and he seemed to take that as a sign of humility.

"You truly are a humble man."

Not really.

"Is there some secret to how you became so skilled in warfare?"

"Not really?"

I quickly changed the topic.

"By the way, when I was investigating Sveniki Castle I realized there was an unnaturally large stockpile of food in its larder. Did you read the report I sent

you?”

“Yes. I believe you said there was more food than the 2,000 troops stationed there could finish in an entire winter.”

Ryaag was clearly expecting a larger army to be stationed in his castle. Naturally, Prince Ashley’s army had no plans for using Sveniki Castle as a forward base. Meaning there was only one reason for Ryaag to have stockpiled all that food.

“It looks like he’d been making preparations to aid Prince Woroy’s army for a long time now.”

“Indeed. He had likely made a deal with Prince Woroy before the war began. Judging by how prepared he was, he’d been on the Doneiks’ side for at least a year before this.”

The only way Ryaag would have been able to gather this much food without attracting attention was by storing small amounts over a long period of time. Prince Ashley sighed.

“Earl Ryaag served my father well for decades. I doubt he would have had a reason to betray him during that time, so my guess is that he’d actually been a Doneiks spy from the very start.”

I felt like Prince Ashley was overthinking things, but considering how crafty Lord Doneiks had been, I could actually see that being the case.

“I no longer know which of my allies to trust. I can’t afford to put others in charge of my troops.”

It seemed Prince Ashley was doubting everyone now. Not that I blamed him. After all, even I wasn’t really his ally. I looked into Prince Ashley’s eyes and said gently, “Don’t worry, Your Highness. Princess Eleora will soon be here with her reinforcements of 15,000 troops. If we combine that with your remaining forces, you’ll have close to forty thousand troops. That’s enough to rival the Doneiks family’s army.”

I pointed to a spot on the map and started explaining the situation to Ashley, who knew little of warfare.

“Right now, Prince Woroy and his men have barricaded themselves in Creech Castle, which is the southernmost castle in North Rolmund.”

The castle sat on a manmade island at the center of Creech Lake, so it was nigh impregnable. And because it was on a lake, defenders would always have enough water and they’d be able to fish for food. They really had it easy. But of course, this was Rolmund, the northernmost empire on the continent. That meant where there was water, there was an exploitable weakness.

“Right now, Creech Lake is frozen enough that soldiers can walk on it. Furthermore, there are no other large castles near the front lines. If we can capture Creech Castle now, we can deal a huge blow to North Rolmund.”

Castles large enough to house tens of thousands of troops weren’t too common. It was obvious the Doneiks family had poured a huge amount of resources into building Creech Castle up, probably because of its ideal location. On the other hand, the surrounding castles were all pathetic. At best they could hold 2-3,000 men each, not enough to withstand a large-scale siege. The outcome of this war depended entirely on whether or not we’d be able to take down Creech Castle. After listening to my explanation Prince Ashley asked, “Do you think you can conquer it?”

To be honest, I wasn’t sure. The castle housed a garrison of 30,000. I wasn’t too skilled at leading massive armies, and as far as I could tell, the castle was impregnable. But it was a bad habit of mine to try and live up to people’s expectations.

“Of course. Just leave it to me. I have a plan.”

While I wasn’t confident in my victory, I did at least have a plan. It was a pretty boring plan, though. I was just going to make use of my werewolves’ special abilities. If that didn’t work, I’d draw the war into a battle of attrition and wear down both sides. Since I’d already succeeded once, I was hoping Prince Ashley would forgive a single failure.

Dear Airia,

Thank you for your previous letter. I've been on the move recently, so I apologize for taking so long to pen a reply. I would have liked to send something sooner, but all of Rolmund is embroiled in a war now. Winters in Rolmund are pleasant enough if you can afford to spend them indoors, but once you have to camp outside, you realize just how harsh they are.

Anything that gets wet freezes instantly, so if you soak your clothes or a rope in water, you can just put them outside for a few seconds and suddenly you have a stick. Your breath freezes the moment it leaves your mouth, too. It turns into tiny ice crystals and falls to the ground. Honestly, despite the cold, it's quite entertaining. Oh, but food with high water content tends to freeze, so if you're camping outside, the only rations you can eat are dried and salted things. I'm getting pretty sick of the taste of salt now. Also, even though there's snow everywhere, sources of unfrozen water are really precious.

Some time before your last letter arrived, one of Prince Ashley's nobles defected to the Doneiks side and I had to reconquer his castle. I snuck in through the window the same way I had when I came to your manor, but I wasn't able to settle things as peacefully with him, sadly. While we may be at war, it feels quite bad to have to kill someone I don't hate. Of course, I know it's a soldier's job to get used to killing, but I don't really feel like a soldier. If anything, I'm more of a mage and a scholar, so it's hard to come to terms with killing people.

Things have been pretty rough for Kite and Lacy as well for the same reason. They're both exhausted. In retrospect, I shouldn't have taken them with me to a battlefield. I know it's weird for a general of the demon army to say this, but I'd really like it if this war would just end already. I want to go home to Meraldia and see your smile again.

Sincerely, Veight.

While Prince Ashley was reorganizing his forces, Eleora arrived in the capital with her troops. Her 15,000 strong army consisted of soldiers from her own Originia family's lands, as well as her uncle Lord Kastoniev's lands.

"I would thank you for watching over my manor while I was gone Lord Veight, but..." Eleora sighed. "I heard you went out to recapture a castle already. Do try to leave some of the glory for my men as well."

"Don't worry, the real battle is yet to come. Our goal is to capture Creech Castle and crush the Doneiks family. We'll definitely need East Rolmund's help for that."

Eleora smiled gently at me.

"Sorry for the wait. But my uncle and I have successfully rallied all of our nobles. They definitely won't betray us."

A note of confidence entered Eleora's smile. *Alright, let's see what the future empress is capable of.* As soon as Eleora arrived, the joint Ashley-Eleora army advanced on Creech Castle. I'd been expecting the first truly big castle I saw in this world to be like the fantasy castles I read about in fairy tales, but in truth, Creech Castle looked pretty much like Osaka Castle. Except it was sitting on a lake as big as Lake Biwa. It was honestly still pretty impressive.

The castle even had its own navy to protect itself from naval assaults. Fortunately, the lake was frozen over enough that infantry could walk on it. The castle's warships couldn't move either, so they were being used as glorified watchtowers.

However, if the Doneiks army managed to break the ice somehow, all the soldiers standing on the surface of the lake would sink under the weight of their armor so we had to be careful with our positioning. Furthermore, we wouldn't be able to build any fortifications on the ice. So instead I had the army set up around the lakeshore. The lake itself was so large that we were only able to surround half of it before we ran out of soldiers. I'd wanted to cut off all potential supply routes to the castle, but the lake was so big that my encirclement ended up full of holes.

Prince Ashley had around 20,000 troops while Eleora had 15,000. Parker glanced curiously around the lake as he watched the soldiers line up and asked,

“Hey Veight, is it just me or is Ashley’s army even smaller than before?”

“He lost a lot of troops at the battle at Nodgrad, and then he lost some more when Ryaag betrayed him.”

All the troops that had belonged to Ryaag were court-martialed for betraying Prince Ashley. Rolmundians showed no mercy to traitors. Originally, they’d all been slated for execution, but Prince Ashley had looked like he didn’t want to kill them, so I asked for clemency on his behalf. In the end, Prince Ashley’s generals had given the prisoners to me to do with as I saw fit. However, they were stripped of their rank and booted out of Prince Ashley’s army, which was still pretty cruel. So I’d given the 2,000-odd men to Eleora, and she’d incorporated them into her army. Afterwards, Prince Ashley thanked me for sparing their lives.

Due to their earlier defeat and the subsequent betrayal by Ryaag, Prince Ashley’s army’s morale was low. Furthermore, his army wasn’t as big as it could be because his allies were reluctant to send over their troops. Eleora’s army, on the other hand, was in high spirits. They were more than ready to earn honor and glory for themselves. Looking back, I saw Ser Lekomya and a few other nobles poring over a map nearby. They were all bedecked in shiny new armor.

“It’s finally time.”

“This battle will decide whether we stay landless forever, or win our own territory.”

I’d lent most of the young nobles a few squads to command. Though they only had a few dozen troops under them, they were at least proper officers now. I walked over to them and gave them both some encouragement and a warning.

“Gentlemen, Princess Eleora has granted you command because she believes in your leadership abilities. Be sure to lead your soldiers well and avoid wasting their lives.”

Because commanders were rewarded for their individual accomplishments, allied nobles often competed with each other to rack up the most merit. As a result, their troops often suffered larger casualties than would otherwise be necessary. I’d taken measures to make sure our allies didn’t squabble among

each other, so I hoped no one did anything reckless.

I watched as our two armies finished taking up positions in the formation I'd devised. As they finished setting up, I noticed a commotion on the far side of the lake.

"What's going on?" Eleora asked, squinting. I took out my telescope and peered through it. A large sleigh packed full of crates was sliding across the frozen lake. It was being led by a squad of 20 or so humans.

"It looks like one of the enemy's supply sleighs slipped past our encirclement and is running for the castle."

Eleora scrunched up her face.

"I know our encirclement is full of holes, but I find it difficult to believe a supply sleigh could break through so easily. Are you sure it's one of their supply teams?"

"Yeah, that struck me as strange too... On top of that, the sleigh's moving too fast. Those crates are probably empty. I bet it's a trap to lure our men in."

I quickly sent off a messenger to tell all of Eleora's troops in the vicinity not to give chase. The lake provided both food and water to the castle anyway, so from the very start, I hadn't planned on employing starvation tactics. It was more important to be wary of traps than to deny the enemy supplies. However, I had no control over Prince Ashley's army, and it seemed some of his generals weren't as perceptive. Borsche took out his own telescope and said, "I see the order of Saint Ethelina's knights giving chase. They've sent sixty or so infantry after the sleigh."

One of the Sonnenlicht knight orders, huh? The knight orders were strong and convenient to have around, but they answered to the pope, not Prince Ashley, so he couldn't give them orders. They were probably only thinking about killing the enemies that appeared in front of them, cutting off Prince Woroy's supplies, and earning as much merit as possible. We watched on as the enemy's sleigh managed to lure the knights all the way to the center of the lake.

"Ah...I see what they're doing."

A second after I said that, the ice near the knights cracked and broke. Some of

them were too close to the hole and they sank into the water. The tiny hole caused a chain reaction along the surface of the lake and even more chunks of ice cracked and broke. Before long, most of the 60 knights fell in. Lacy turned to me and shouted, “O-Oh no! We have to go save them!”

But I shook my head.

“It’s too late.”

The knights were all wearing armor, and the water was close to freezing. They’d lose consciousness not long after falling in. Even if I sent my fastest werewolves, they wouldn’t make it in time. The moment most of the knights fell, the soldiers transporting the sleigh turned around and started firing crossbows into the remaining knights. The soldiers all had impeccable aim, and all of the knights were mowed down. Saint Ethelina’s knights were no more. The soldiers they’d been chasing hadn’t been transport guards. They’d been special forces trained specifically for missions like this. Eleora turned to me and muttered, “That’s a basic tactic for fighting on frozen lakes. They probably weakened the ice in that area beforehand. There are plenty of ways to do that.”

As soon as the crossbowmen finished their assault, they retreated back to the safety of Creech Castle. Eleora sighed as she watched them go.

“The Doneiks probably put more than a few ambush units like that near the lakeshore. They’ll definitely use tactics like this again.”

Indeed, the Doneiks army pulled the same trick the next day, and even the day after. Even though they knew it was a trap, there was always one or two units who felt like they could catch the enemy. Naturally, every unit who tried got annihilated. After a few days, people finally got the hint and stopped chasing transports. But once they did, actual transports laden with goods started sneaking their way to Creech Castle. Realizing they’d been had, members of Prince Ashley’s army started giving chase again, only to start falling for traps again.

Prince Ashley’s army lost a few hundred people without ever once engaging in a proper battle. Meanwhile, Eleora didn’t lose a single man. In fact, she managed to capture a few of the actual transport teams. It helped that werewolves are extremely sensitive to the smell of food, so they were able to

let her know which sleighs to target. Still, it seemed like this battle was going to be a long one.

—Airia's Reply: 4—

Dear Veight,

I see Rolmund's civil war has begun in earnest now. Knowing you, you've surely thrown yourself into the center of everything. The other councilors have expressed their regret at being unable to do anything to help you directly. None of us want you to bear the full burden of this job, but unfortunately we cannot leave our posts. All of us are worried about Lacy and Kite as well. I pray both of them are still safe and sound.

The council discussed sending you reinforcements, but because Meraldia's soldiers aren't equipped for combat in snow, and because of how far Rolmund is, we decided it would be a bad idea. I'm terribly sorry for being unable to assist you. If it seems as though your forces are facing a hopeless battle and our cause is lost, please abandon your mission and return home. Even if you can't save anyone else, please make sure you survive. The council and the demon army dearly need you. We cannot afford to lose you. To me at least, your life has more value than all of Rolmund.

Of course, I would love nothing more than to see everyone return home safe and sound, though. So if the war effort turns south, please retreat before any of you are put in danger. The Meraldian Commonwealth is not so weak that it will crumble in the face of a single war.

Incidentally, you mentioned in your previous letter that you were getting tired of salty preserved foods, so I've sent some Meraldian fruit for you together with this letter. Please share it with everyone. You mentioned you were enjoying the cold climate of Rolmund, but despite how casual your letter was, I'm certain you're working yourself much harder than you should. I imagine you're keeping your letters lighthearted to avoid worrying me, and I respect that. But still,

please allow me to pray for your safety. I hope that the snowy winter road you walk is free of hardships.

“I guess Airia’s getting pretty worried about me...”

I sighed and cast my gaze southward. I picked up one of the raisins she’d sent with her letter and plopped it into my mouth. It was sweet, and tart, and reminded me of home. *Thanks, Airia.* She was probably wringing her hands with worry right now, wondering how my battle was going. There was no internet or telephones in this world, so it was hard to exchange information over long distances. It was obvious just from how shaky the letters were that Airia was worried, but was trying not to show it. *Sorry. I promise I won’t charge in alone anymore. I hope.*

Our siege of Creech Castle was still ongoing. I was on my way to a war council with Eleora and her generals. The moment I walked into the command tent, I noticed how gloomy the atmosphere was. We’d wanted to assault Creech Castle, but the lake was too frozen to attack via boat. On the other hand, we couldn’t advance with too large an army or Prince Woroy’s men would shatter the ice around us again. We couldn’t bring catapults or other siege engines onto the ice either.

“We lack any good offensive options, but we won’t be able to starve them out with a siege like this either.”

I nodded in agreement with Eleora.

“Yeah. Normally when an army holes up in their castle, it’s because they’re expecting reinforcements to relieve them. If we take too long, Prince Ivan’ll come at us with a separate army.”

We had an unbroken supply line from the capital so Prince Woroy knew we wouldn’t be running out of food any time soon. Since he couldn’t wait us out or wear us down with attrition, his plan was likely to wait until Prince Ivan came to relieve him. Eleora glanced outside and lapsed into thought.

“We’ve spread our men out pretty thin to encircle the lake, meaning we’re susceptible to an attack from behind. Even if the enemy sends only a few reinforcements, it’ll be enough to sow chaos among our ranks. And there’s no doubt Woroy’ll sortie with his army if that happens.”

Our army hadn’t grown in size at all since we’d begun our siege. Prince Ashley’s allies, West Rolmund’s nobles, seemed content to wait and see how the battle progressed. Thanks to Eleora joining his cause, his allies didn’t abandon him, but they weren’t fully committed to him either. It was because of this that Prince Ashley was having such a hard time. Borsche placed a chip that symbolized soldiers on a section of the map and muttered, “It’ll be difficult to repel enemy reinforcements while also maintaining this encirclement. Especially since our soldiers aren’t very coordinated.”

Unlike the imperial army, the troops belonging to various noble lords hadn’t modernized. Their command structure was different from that of Prince Ashley’s core army, and trying to give multiple orders at once to any of them led to confusion and chaos. Lacy, who was also present at the meeting, started absently playing with the chip markers and muttered, “Can we just ignore this castle and keep marching north?”

Borsche, Eleora, and I all exchanged glances. They both signaled to me; it seemed explaining was my job. Sighing, I said simply, “If we stop surrounding this castle, Prince Woroy will be able to march straight onto the capital. If we leave enough troops behind to prevent him from doing that, we won’t have an army large enough to continue our invasion.”

Smiling wryly, Eleora added gently, “It’s both a strategic and a tactical mistake to do that. Soldiers in marching formation are susceptible to attack. If we try to march past the castle, Woroy could send his troops out to wreak havoc on our lines.”

“Haah... I see.”

I couldn’t tell if Lacy understood that explanation or not. She looked confused for a moment, but then she clapped her hands together and said, “So basically we’re stuck in place, right? Wow, Prince Woroy’s amazing.”

So she gets it after all. Now that it’d come to this, the only way to break this

deadlock was by working outside of the battlefield. The time had finally come for me to act.

“Alright, let’s go with the plan I came up with before. I have no idea if it’ll work or not, but it’s the best a werewolf like me can come up with.”

Lacy cocked her head at me as she made a complicated geometric shape with the spare chip markers.

“Are you going to transform and fight?”

I shook my head.

“Nah. It’s impossible to topple a castle this big through brute force alone. I’ve got a different idea.”

Grinning, I turned to Kite—who was acting as this meeting’s secretary—and patted his shoulder.

“I’ve got work for you, Kite.”

“Again!?”

Hey, being a vice-commander’s tough.

I had Eleora’s army set up a checkpoint a few kilometers north of Creech Castle. It wasn’t much, just a simple enclosure protected by a small fence. But Eleora’s flags were flying everywhere from it, making it stand out. Which was exactly what we needed. Two days later, it did its job.

“Oh, there’s the whistle.”

I looked up from my paperwork. I’d holed up in the checkpoint’s hut to get some administrative work done. As expected, Prince Woroy had fallen for the trap.

“Alright Kite, let’s go.”

I followed the sound of the whistle to a nearby forest, where I met up with Monza’s squad.

“Hah, that was a piece of cake. Oh, I didn’t kill anyone, by the way.”

A man who looked like a priest lay unconscious at Monza’s feet.

“He ran into the forest the moment he saw the checkpoint, so it was easy to tell he was the one. And of course, tracking him down was a piece of cake.”

Monza was a master of stealth, so the man had probably been knocked out without ever realizing what hit him. Just in case, I cast sleeping magic on him too. He’d be stuck in Non-REM sleep for at least an hour or so now. At least he’d wake up refreshed.

“Even if he tried to sneak past the checkpoint, Kite’s magic would have seen right through them. He was doomed no matter what he did. Anyway, Kite, you’re up.”

Sighing, Kite squatted down next to the man. He placed a hand on his back and muttered a short incantation. He cast a few spells, investigating various parts of the man’s body. He then looked up and said, “This guy’s a Doneiks’ spy. Also, his left sleeve is slightly heavier than his right sleeve.”

I patted his sleeve and felt something hard inside it. It was impossible to tell there was anything different about it from the outside, and you couldn’t see any pockets anywhere. It was probably a double-layered pocket sewn directly into the sleeve.

“They’re probably his orders. Kite.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

There was an epoch magic spell that allowed the caster to read the contents of a book or letter without opening it. It seemed extremely handy so I’d tried to learn it too, but it was harder than it seemed. Kite cast it on the priest and read the letter in his sleeve.

“It’s a letter from Prince Ivan to Prince Woroy. It says, ‘Of the two cows causing us grief, one should be easy to slaughter. Would you like to come partake of its meat?’ There’s some more past that, but that’s the main thing.”

Monza cocked her head.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t get it.”

I didn’t get it either. Kite turned to Monza and said, “They’ve replaced key words with code words so that if the message is intercepted it can’t be

deciphered. This code is pretty simple, though.”

Kite was used to deciphering codes like these. Epoch magic was capable of giving him useful hints, and he was a pro cryptanalyst anyway. After a few seconds of staring intently at the man’s sleeve, Kite turned back to me and said, “Rolmund often uses ‘beef’ to refer to an influential supporter, so if we carry the metaphor into a military context they’re probably referring to reinforcements. I’m guessing each ‘cow’ refers to ten thousand men.”

“Haah...I see.”

Monza nodded in understanding. I nodded as well.

“I’m guessing Prince Woroy asked for twenty thousand in reinforcements, and Prince Ivan is saying the first ten thousand is already ready. And he’s asking if he should send them over first. He likely had his secretary write this, it doesn’t look like his handwriting. As far as I can tell, this spy doesn’t have any knowledge of what the letter says either.”

“Man, you really are amazing.”

“You have to be at least this good to get a job as an official Senate investigator. Too bad they treat all their skilled workers like trash.”

You’re still holding a grudge about that? I turned the information Kite had deciphered in my mind.

“We’ll be in trouble if they send ten thousand over right now. It’d be best if Prince Woroy never reads this message. Monza, take care of it.”

“Aye aye, boss.”

She untied a string on the priest’s sleeve and took the letter out of his pocket. Normally confidential letters like these were sealed with wax, but Prince Ivan had probably foregone the seal to make the letter even thinner and harder to spot.

“Alright, let’s slip him a fake. Kite, write one up for me.”

“Please stop making me do everything!”

Too bad, I know you’re a skilled forger. Now get to work. Had it been written by Prince Ivan himself, Kite would have had a hard time forging his handwriting,

but making a letter look like it was written by a generic secretary was a lot easier. Grumbling to himself, Kite opened up his bag. He pulled out some ink bottles, a piece of paper, and a few different kinds of pens. Using his epoch magic to aid him, he picked out the pen that was closest to the one the original letter had been written with.

“Umm, I think this quill pen is closest...and the ink’s black with a bit of blue pigment in it. The paper’s...expensive parchment made from sheepskin...specifically the white sheep North Rolmund is famous for. Oh yeah, what do you want the letter to say?”

“Tell him it’ll take a bit longer to send the reinforcements over. Make it sound as curt as possible. I want Prince Woroy to be worried.”

“You’re evil, Veight.”

“I mean I’m not human, so...”

I shrugged my shoulders and Monza chuckled. Once the fake was done, Monza skillfully sewed it back into the priest’s sleeve. We didn’t want him thinking even the slightest thing was off, so she used the same thread his clothes were made of. Chances were the deception would work. To be absolutely sure though, Kite placed magical wards on the priest’s clothes and the letter, so that even if the priest knew epoch magic, he wouldn’t be able to sense anything out of the ordinary.

“Alright, this should be good enough. Even if he uses magic to peek into the past, he won’t see anything.”

All that was left was to make sure he woke up where he’d lost consciousness and be out of sight when he did. We couldn’t do anything to stop him from realizing he’d passed out, so hopefully he wouldn’t find that part too strange. *I should figure out a better way to do this next time.*

“Anyway, I guess this proves our encirclement has holes in it.”

In this world, everything was pitch dark on nights when the moon wasn’t out. That meant it was hard to keep an eye on things, and this spy obviously knew some way to slip in and out of the castle without being noticed by our troops. *I should have Monza tail him to find out how he does it.* I decided to leave the

rest to Monza's squad and go back to my hut. I still had a ton of paperwork waiting for me.

"Good work, Monza. Keep it up."

"Aye aye, boss."

I waved to Monza, who gave me a lazy salute, and headed back to the checkpoint with Kite. On the way back Kite muttered, "Hey, Veight?"

"Yeah?"

"Isn't this a kind of...boring plan?"

You don't have to put it like that.

"I'm not good at large-scale warfare. I don't have the skills to properly command an army this big."

I'd learned the basics of strategy and tactics when I'd first started in the demon army. But commanding an army this large was best left in the hands of those trained for it. An average person like me wasn't fit to lead. Which was why I'd decided to leave commanding to the commanders while I did what I could from the shadows.

"It's fine, sometimes a boring plan is what you need. We're both boring vice-commanders after all."

"I won't deny that I'm boring, but I'm *your* vice-commander."

"Yeah, and I'm the Demon Lord's vice-commander."

We continued bantering with each other as we slipped under the checkpoint's gate.

Thanks to my sabotage efforts, Prince Ivan had yet to send reinforcements. However, Prince Woroy was expecting them, so the perceived lack of communication on Prince Ivan's part was driving a wedge between their relationship. I continued intercepting all messages between them, stopping Prince Woroy's requests for reinforcements and Prince Ivan's letters asking when he should send them. Prince Ivan was wondering why Prince Woroy kept saying no to the reinforcements he was offering while Prince Woroy was

wondering why Prince Ivan wasn't sending him any.

While it sounded like I had them dancing in the palm of my hand, in truth, coming up with convincing letters for both sides was pretty hard. If I made even one strange remark, they'd realize their messages were being intercepted.

I was walking a dangerous tightrope here.

On top of that, the actual act of replacing letters with fakes wasn't easy either. And there was always the worry I'd let a messenger slip through. If I had, it meant Prince Woroy and Prince Ivan already knew I was doctoring messages and could probably tell which were real. To be honest, I had no idea how effective my misinformation campaign was. However, I was at least able to get a good grasp of what routes Prince Woroy's spies were using to get in and out of the castle without being caught by my encirclement. Furthermore, I'd memorized all their scents, so ambushing them was easy. The hard part was making sure they didn't notice we'd swapped the messages in their sleeves. I'd tried various things like having Hamaam's squad sneak into their inn rooms while they slept and swapping the letters out then, or having Lacy distract them with illusions while Monza did a switch. I was so short-handed that I'd even enlisted Parker's help. Our counterspy maneuvers took a lot of work.

"There's a necromancy spell that can drain the life force of others. Normally necromancers use it on themselves to gain a glimpse into the world of death, but...I could use it on the spies to make them anemic, and then pretend to come to their aid. It's not a bad... Veight, are you listening?"

"You can't use that multiple times, so it's not a good permanent solution. You can use it for now, but you need to come up with another idea soon."

"You sure work people like slaves... Well, I'll think of something within the next six letters or so."

I knew I could count on my fellow disciple. Incidentally, most of Prince Ivan's letters were saying things like "Are you lacking in any supplies?" or "Make sure to give your men time to rest and relax." or "I'm sorry for forcing you to hold the castle. I'm proud to have such a caring and loyal brother."

Though Prince Woroy and Prince Ivan were polar opposites in terms of personality, they were obviously close. I hadn't had any siblings in my past life

or this one, so I was a little jealous. Of course, all of those messages were encoded, but Kite was able to decipher all of them.

“I wonder why it is that people in positions of power all think up the same codes?”

Kite shook his head with a sigh as he looked down at the latest letter. He’d seen a lot in his time, and apparently most of them were encoded the same way. Cryptology hadn’t really taken off in this world, so it wasn’t surprising that Kite could decode most things. Especially considering he was observant, a master of epoch magic, and a trained analyst. Furthermore, he was being backed up by werewolves, who were all masters of stealth and tracking. I was confident that the demon lord’s side had the edge when it came to this information war. It pained me to drive these two brothers apart, but this was war.

Now then, how should I forge this one. As I was pondering how to word my next forgery, we made our way back to Eleora’s main camp. We found her listening to a report from one of her men.

“Lord Veight, perfect timing. The messenger we sent to Woroy just returned.”

“Messenger? Were you asking them to surrender?”

Eleora smirked.

“You’re trying to drive those two brothers apart, right? I thought I’d help you out.”

It took me a second, but I figured out what Eleora meant.

“Prince Ivan will start to worry if he sees his brother is negotiating with you, huh?”

“Indeed. Woroy’s already shown he’s fond of you. I’m sure Ivan’s already afraid he might try to make a deal with you.”

It was a pretty straightforward plan, but with how suspicious Rolmundians were of each other, it would probably still be effective.

Soon enough, Prince Ivan sent a letter asking, “You’ve been negotiating quite

often with Eleora. Did something happen?" I naturally replaced the letter with a forgery, removing the question entirely. Since Prince Woroy didn't even know his brother was suspicious, he didn't offer any explanation for his actions in his next message. I let that one go through without alteration and Prince Ivan replied with a sterner message asking Prince Woroy to explain himself. I replaced that one with a forgery as well.

Again, Prince Ivan asked, "What are you negotiating with Eleora and Lord Veight? I trust your judgment; I just want to know what your plans are." I grinned as I watched how Prince Ivan's doubts grew by the day. As with all of his letters, I replaced it with a forgery.

"These two brothers really are close, aren't they?" Kite muttered as he looked through the latest message. I nodded.

"To be honest with you, I feel guilty about doing this. But if Prince Ivan and Prince Woroy remain united, we won't be able to win this war."

Of course, Eleora and Prince Ashley had their own alliance, but theirs was a temporary pact made out of necessity, not trust. If I wanted to win, I needed to ignore my conscience and rip these two brothers apart. Fortunately, Prince Ivan was already beginning to worry Eleora had somehow convinced Prince Woroy to stop fighting. On the other hand, Prince Woroy was starting to panic as more time passed and reinforcements from his brother still weren't here.

—Prince Ivan's Worries—

After considering our resources, I write down the best plan I can think of. Of course, resources mean more than just horses and funds. People and time are also valuable resources. And right now, I'm lacking in the most valuable resource of all, time.

Working for too long drains me of my stamina. But there are plenty of duties, like war councils and troop inspections, that cannot go ahead without me. Fortunately, my reliable brother Woroy is fighting on the front lines for me.

Though it's rather shameful that I, the older brother, am sitting safely in my castle while he fights on my behalf. If I could, I would have entrusted the rearguard to him and led the vanguard myself. As it is, right now my brother is surrounded by enemies and waiting for reinforcements. At least I hope he is.

But even if he is, I'm having a hard time sending them.

"What's the situation on the battlefield?" I ask my spy.

"Creech Castle has been surrounded by the Ashley-Eleora army. They've set up encampments on all of the key shores, and it's proving difficult to engage them."

"They have that many troops?"

The Doneiks family spy gives me an apologetic look.

"All of the roads leading out of the castle have been blockaded. It's proving difficult to even ferry messages between you and Prince Woroy, Your Highness."

Though the spies themselves didn't seem aware of it, their messages were being intercepted. There was a surprising amount of inconsistency within the correspondence Woroy was sending me. Of course, sending him 20,000 troops would leave this castle under-defended. Furthermore, if my reinforcements ended up encountering enemies en route, they'd be forced to fight a battle in the open field. That's the last thing I want. If both sides started bleeding soldiers in a war of attrition, North Rolmund—with its proportionally smaller population—would fall first. I can't afford to send my soldiers out so long as there's a possibility they'll end up fighting on the open plains.

If I send soldiers, it has to be when their arrival will be enough to break the siege for sure, or when there's enough of an opening for them to safely reach Creech Castle's walls.

Until I'm certain my reinforcements can achieve one of those two objectives, I can't ask my nobles to send me more troops. All of my lords want to keep their soldiers to protect their own territory. Furthermore, winter expeditions are dangerous and expensive. Eleora and Ashley are probably worried they'll get hit from behind, but I can't just move what troops I have left that easily.

“And if circumstances force you to, make sure you win, no matter what it takes... The same way you succeeded in killing me...”

My deceased father’s words come back to me. If I send the full force of my reinforcements to help Woroy, they absolutely need to achieve a military victory, because if they don’t, my lords will lose faith in me. They may even start abandoning me. I need to win, no matter what. That means I need to pick a fight I can’t lose. However, I don’t have enough information to know for sure that I can win if I fight now. Woroy’s messages are being intercepted by the enemy, and I’m having a hard time discerning which are real. Chances are Eleora and Veight are behind the sabotage. I wonder how much of our plans they’ve already uncovered. How many of my messages are even reaching Woroy? How many of his are reaching me? It’s like I’m standing inside a thick fog with no idea where to go. I just don’t have enough information. Seeing me fall silent, my aides walk up to me.

“Prince Ivan, if we wait until spring the lake’s ice will melt. Once that happens, Creech Castle will become truly impregnable. The longer this war drags on, the greater our advantage grows.”

“He’s right, Your Highness. Please, do not worry. Once the snow melts we will be able to maneuver our troops more easily, and sending reinforcements will no longer be an issue.”

Oh no, now I’ve made my aides worry.

“Thank you. It’s as you say, my friends. We should strengthen our defenses and focus on gathering information.”

For now, I’ll wait and see. The kind of strategy my father used to hate. He said it was a waste of time, the most valuable resource. In many ways, he was right. I don’t have much time left for myself, either. But I’m sure I can at least survive until spring.

What about next spring though? Or the spring after? The longer this war drags on, the more likely it is I’ll die of illness before it’s over. Furthermore, once spring comes, Meraldia will be able to send reinforcements as well. I can’t afford to prolong this war too much.

Once my aides leave, I hole up in my study. Looking outside my window I see

enough snow's fallen that it's piling up to the second floor. This is all happening because our planned invasion of the capital failed. I never imagined Sveniki Castle would be retaken so easily. Creech Castle is too far from the capital to launch consecutive assaults on it, and moving troops to and from the castle is difficult. It's not suited as an offensive base. What a mess. But even so, it's important to be cautious when the unexpected happens. I stare at the snow piling up outside, thinking deep thoughts.

I had no idea if my counterintelligence measures were having any effect, so I kept thinking of ways to bring down the castle, even as I tampered with as much of Prince Woroy and Prince Ivan's correspondence as possible. Once spring came and the ice melted, Prince Woroy would be able to send his battleships out to attack our armies on the lakeshore. Those things were so heavily armored that they were like mobile fortresses. On top of that, we had no fleet of our own so we wouldn't be able to easily hit them back.

"Hey boss, are you sure just doing this is enough? It's gonna be spring soon."

Jerrick looked up from the sword he was repairing. He'd taken to inspecting and repairing Eleora's men's equipment on his off time recently.

"Once spring comes and the snow melts, we'll be able to call for reinforcements from Meraldia too."

"We will?"

"Probably not, but that's what our enemy's thinking."

Meraldia's viceroys could probably only afford to send an army of a few thousand up north. The demon army wouldn't be able to send much more either, and I didn't want to call for demons since their presence in Rolmund would throw the empire into chaos. So in the end, reinforcements from Meraldia wouldn't be enough to change the situation. But Prince Woroy didn't know what our internal situation looked like, so he was probably worried about a huge Meraldian army marching northward come spring. The letters he'd sent to his brother often mentioned Meraldia's army, too. The cautiousness he

inherited from his father was coming back to bite him now.

Jerrick put down the sword and picked up a bundle of crossbow bolts. He inspected each one, making sure none were bent and said, “Once spring comes the lake’s gonna melt. And we don’t have any boats, do we?”

“Yeah, we don’t. We could try and build our own fleet, but I doubt they’ll let us do that right under their noses.”

In truth, we really couldn’t afford to drag this out. Right now, Rolmund was experiencing the coldest period of winter. In Earth calendar terms, it was around January. Spring didn’t reach Rolmund until well into May, so we still had a few months of frozen lake left. But our troops were getting exhausted, so the sooner I could wrap this up the better.

“Umm, is this good enough?”

“Yep! Thanks, Natalia!”

I turned toward Lacy and Natalia, who were conversing a short distance away. It seemed like Natalia had just finished making a snow hut. Their snow hut was a lot more elaborate than mine had been, with windows and a curtain hanging over the entrance. Natalia used frost magic on the hut to help harden the walls, and looked proudly down at her work.

“Go inside and see what it looks like, Lacy. These are the kinds of huts hunters in Rolmund make when they’re hunting in winter.”

Lacy ducked inside and looked around.

“Wow, this is amazing! It’s even warm in here! It reminds me of home!”

Oh yeah, I forgot Lacy’s from the northern tip of Meraldia. She probably made things like these when she was a kid. Enjoying the praise, Natalia continued using frost magic to harden the hut’s exterior. Since she was part of the mage corps, she was naturally a mage. The sniper squad she was part of was power-focused, and all of its members were skilled users of destruction magic. Destruction magic drained a lot of mana, so most destruction mages had large mana pools. The frost magic Natalia was currently using was a subset of that same destruction magic. Noticing my gaze, Natalia blushed slightly and gave me a salute.

“Ah, my apologies, sir! Lacy wanted a location she could evacuate to if necessary, so I was constructing one for her!”

It was obvious they’d just been playing around, but I decided to let it slide. They were off-duty anyway. That aside, I was kind of impressed by how easily Lacy could get along with literally anyone. Or well, literally anyone that was a mage.

“That’s a well-made hut, Natalia.”

“Thank you very much, sir! Frost magic is my specialty, so I can guarantee it’s one of the sturdiest you’ll ever see!”

I laid a hand on Natalia’s hut. The snow had congealed together thanks to her frost magic, and it was much sturdier than it looked. *You could probably ride out the whole winter in something this well-made.* The hut itself was strong enough to stop a crossbow bolt with ease, too. *Wait...* Realizing something, I turned back to Natalia. Still smiling, she cocked her head at me.

“Is something wrong, Lord Veight?”

“Can everyone in the mage corps make huts this sturdy?”

Natalia considered my question for a few seconds.

“Well...everyone in the sniper squad can use destruction magic, so all of them could at least.”

“Eleora’s in command of the 203rd-209th mage corps, correct? How many snipers do all the squads have combined?”

“Every corps has a few sniper squads so...there’s probably three to four hundred snipers total.”

Until Eleora developed her magic weapons, mages were rarely used on the battlefield. And those that were had been utilized as scouts or messengers mostly. Right now though, there were hundreds of mages under Eleora’s command. *There might be a way to use these guys to break the siege...*

I quickly called for a war council to find out how practical my idea was.

“After seeing Warrant Officer Natalia’s snow hut, I started wondering if

maybe we could make our own castle of ice to rival Creech Castle.”

Everyone stared at me in shock, too stunned to speak. *Don't worry, there's more to this idea.*

“Just so you know, I’m not suggesting we build a castle on top of the lake. The ice isn’t even strong enough to hold the weight of a catapult; we won’t be able to build anything big on it.”

“Then where do you suggest we build this castle?” Borsche asked, curious. I brought out a map and spread it open.

“Right now, we’ve surrounded Creech Castle. Our army is camped out on the northern half of the lake while Prince Ashley’s army occupies the southern half.”

I’d had Ashley deploy his army on the side closer to the capital, since his troops’ morale was low. Meanwhile, we were in the north, the side that would be attacked first if Prince Ivan decided to send reinforcements. At present, there was nothing around this lakeshore except an open field. To the east and west were deep forests and steep mountains, areas unsuited for maneuvering large forces through. The nearby villages didn’t even have walls, so there was no place we could barricade ourselves if necessary. That meant we had to always be on the lookout for a sortie from the castle to our south, as well as the appearance of reinforcements to our north.

However, if we had a fortress of our own, we wouldn’t need to be so wary. Eleora’s army of 17,000 would become that much more formidable if it had a castle defending it. In fact, we’d be able to withstand a simultaneous assault from Prince Ivan’s 20,000 reinforcements and Prince Woroy’s 30,000 men.

“Fortunately, we have tons of snow here. If we harden it into proper walls, we could create a fortress for our army.”

I’d loved playing with building blocks as a kid back on Earth, and I’d made a fair share of miniature European castles. I’d never made a laketop castle or an ice castle, but now I had a chance to round out my collection. Granted, this would be a snow castle not an ice castle, but it was close enough. In fact, it’d probably end up as more of a glorified set of walls than an actual castle, since making complex structures out of snow was impossible. If anything, it’d look

like one of those giant sculptures they made for the Sapporo Snow Festivals back in Japan.

“Right now, our army needs to be wary of attacks both from the north, and from Creech Castle to the south. But if we have a fortress, we can barricade ourselves in—we could take on both armies at the same time if we have to. We won’t have to worry about being pincerred, and we’ll still have a force large enough to prevent Prince Ivan’s reinforcements from rendezvousing with Prince Woroy.”

We were in a pretty precarious position right now, but with the right fortifications we’d go from being the weakest link to a huge threat. Of course, fortifications made out of snow wouldn’t be impregnable or anything. Especially since it’d be a rushed job. And once spring came, our castle would melt. Still, as long as it was around it would serve an important purpose.

“Most of our soldiers are mage corps. They’re not suited for battles in the open field. But on the flip side, they’re devastating when holding a fortified position.”

Blast Canes were basically medieval guns, but made with magic.

“If we can build up some fortifications here, our mage corps will be that much more of a threat. Even if Prince Ivan and Prince Woroy pincer us we’ll be able to hold them off.”

And once we were in a position of strength, we wouldn’t need to surround the entire castle to keep Prince Woroy in check. That meant we’d no longer even need Prince Ashley’s army.

“If we can keep Prince Woroy’s army bottled up here with just our forces, Prince Ashley’s men will be able to assault Prince Ivan.”

It was about time Prince Ashley’s forces started pulling their weight. Of course, once his army left, it was possible Prince Woroy would march onto the capital. But in order to take it, he’d first need to capture all the castles between Creech Castle and the city. And if he started marching on any of those castles, Eleora’s army would be able to hit him from behind. Most army formations were brittle if struck from any direction except from the front, so we’d be able to do a good deal of damage despite our inferior numbers. As I finished my

explanation, Kite raised his hand.

“Can you explain how exactly you’re going to build these fortifications?”

I’m glad you asked.

“The answer’s simple. We’ll shovel the snow around us and pile it up around our encampment. That’s something every Rolmundian is used to doing.”

We didn’t exactly need skilled engineers for this.

“But by my estimations, we’re a little short on snow so we’ll need to quarry blocks of ice over from the lake. That alone won’t be enough, so we’re going to need to draw water from the lake and have the mage corps freeze that as well.”

I doubted I was the first person to come up with the idea of a snow fort, but I would likely be the first to successfully implement it. The biggest problem was even if an army wanted to make fortifications out of snow, there just wasn’t enough of it. Even during the Sapporo Snow Festival back on Earth, the sculptures used so much snow that the city had to import truckloads of it from elsewhere. There wasn’t enough in Sapporo itself.

Fortunately for us, Eleora’s army had hundreds of mages capable of using frost magic. And we had a lake full of water right next to us.

“The fortifications don’t have to be super tall to begin with. Even if they’re only waist height, they’ll be enough to give our mage corps a safe location to shoot from. Once we’ve gotten them to that level we can see what resources we have to work with and figure out how much more we can build them up.”

Unlike archers, mage corps could fire their weapons from a crouch so even modest fortifications were enough to protect them. And as long as they were protected, they were a force to be reckoned with.

“Ideally, I’d like to get our walls to the height of regular castle walls. If we coat the outer sections in ice, they’ll become impossible to climb too.”

After that, we can start making arrow slits and watchtowers and... My end goal was rather ambitious, though I doubted we’d be able to make everything I wanted. Eleora turned to me and asked, “Do you have a plan to keep Woroy at bay while we’re working on building the fort up?”

“I do. Though I imagine he won’t be able to attack us too easily if we cut up the ice near the lakeshore anyway, which we’ll have to do to get at the water underneath.”

Getting rid of all the ice was likely impossible but we’d be able to cut out enough of it that soldiers and cavalry couldn’t safely cross. Once we did that, we just needed to make sure the sections of the lake we’d quarried from didn’t refreeze.

Afterwards, we started hashing out the details of my plan. In the end, everyone agreed, since the risks of failure were low, and it wasn’t like there was anything else to do with our soldiers at the moment. Once the decision to build a snow fort was made, we started construction right away. Eleora put soldiers to work digging out snow the very same day. Granted, this was work they always did anyway, the only difference was now we were shoveling snow from outside our encampment as well.

Within a few hours, we already had a respectable pile of snow. Unfortunately, it compacted a great deal when we set about hardening it, so we needed to go out and gather yet more snow. Again we raised up a respectable pile that contracted into a tiny mound once hardened. I’d expected this, but it still surprised me just how much snow we’d need for our fortifications. Elsewhere, teams of soldiers hauled in water from the lake and poured it into wooden frameworks where it was then frozen into ice with the mage corps’ frost magic.

Naturally, freezing such large quantities of water took time, and the mage corps needed to expend a large amount of mana for each block of water they froze. There were more frames than there were mage teams so a number of the blocks of water were left out to freeze naturally. Eleora, who’d gone out to inspect everyone’s progress, returned to where I was waiting near the command tent.

“If the mage corps end up being the star of this war, their relative value will rise. That, in turn, will make my value greater as well. You planned this out with that in mind, didn’t you?”

I grinned at Eleora.

“Perceptive as always, Princess Eleora.”

Once we defeated the Doneiks Family, we still had the Schwerin Family that was backing Prince Ashley to deal with. In order to make negotiating with them easier, it was imperative that Eleora’s army earned the most achievements during this war. Blast Canes were a weapon Eleora had developed, so if they proved the superior weapon in this war, her stock would rise among the other nobles. Of course, that didn’t mean I was planning on having Prince Ashley’s army do nothing.

“If Prince Ashley ends up engaging Prince Ivan on the field, do you think he can win?”

Eleora smiled ruefully.

“If nothing else, I know the quality of Ivan’s twenty thousand reinforcements isn’t on par with the 30,000 strong regular army Woroy’s commanding.”

Commanders wanted to lower casualties on their side as much as possible, so they almost always chose to mobilize their elites first. Besides, if you had to pay to feed and equip every soldier regardless of whether they had training or not, it made sense that you’d prioritize sending out the trained ones first. However, that meant any reinforcements drafted later on in a war tended to be peasant conscripts who lacked military training.

“Still, what should we do if he somehow loses? Or if he wins, but lets most of Prince Ivan’s army escape to regroup and strike again?”

Eleora shook her head and gave me a wicked grin.

“In that case, we’ll let Ivan’s army destroy Ashley’s. Meanwhile, we’ll retreat and set up a new defensive line using the castles near the capital. As long as Ashley remains in the capital and the capital hasn’t fallen, Ashley’s ‘army’ won’t have lost. Any losses they suffered during their offensive won’t matter.”

Eleora’s plan was tactically sound, but damn she really didn’t show mercy to her enemies. There were a number of fortresses and castles that lay between Creech Castle and the capital. If Prince Woroy sent his army to attack, we’d be able to keep him at bay using those castles. And if he tried to skip past them and strike the capital directly we could hit him in the rear. Even if he struck out

before we could retreat, those castles' current garrisons would slow him down enough that we could catch up and strike at him from behind. Still, we'd be at a disadvantage if he moved before we did, so I'd come up with a plan to seal his movements. I'd already relayed our battle plans to Prince Ashley's men, so he'd likely take his army and march north soon.

"Even if all of our plans fail, I have one last backup in mind. I didn't mention it at the council since I still haven't figured out all the details."

"Oho." Eleora's smile grew mischievous. "Surely you don't mind telling at least me? We're friends, right?"

"It's a pretty stupid plan. I'm not even sure you could really call it a plan, actually."

"Stop being so evasive and spit it out already. Personally, I'm a fan of the unorthodox strategies you come up with."

Eleora had brightened up a lot since making up with Lord Kastoniev. As a result, she'd gotten a lot more comfortable talking to me too. After thinking about it for a few seconds I said, "Alright, I'll tell you. Lean closer."

"Sure."

I brought my face close to Eleora's ear and whispered, "I'll infiltrate the castle and assassinate Prince Woroy."

Eleora blinked in surprise and looked up at me. After a few seconds, she burst out laughing.

"Hahahahahaha!"

"Don't laugh! See, I told you it was a bad plan."

I suddenly regretted telling her. But Eleora waved her hand dismissively and said, "Oh, I'm not laughing because I think it's bad. Hahaha, it's just, I never considered that was an option too."

Wiping tears from her eyes Eleora struggled to contain her laughter.

"You're probably the only person that can pull something like that off. If you're willing to do it, why not just try it now?"

“I’d rather not risk my life if I don’t have to...”

Creech Castle was huge, its walls were tall, and its garrison was massive. If I tried to take it on with just my werewolves, there’d definitely be casualties even if we succeeded. I wanted to keep my squad intact, especially since I’d need them for future battles. And obviously, I didn’t want to die either.

“I’m not as strong as you think. I’m nowhere close to omnipotent. I’m just an average werewolf who happens to know how to use a little magic.”

“If you’re too humble it’ll come off as insincerity, Black Werewolf King.”

I’m not being humble, this is just an objective assessment. I’m really not that strong. If I had to fight a hundred armored men, I’d lose for sure. I rubbed my neck and sighed.

“I really don’t want to fight a battle as close as the one against you at Ryunheit ever again.”

Eleora smiled faintly and nodded at me.

“Well, I suppose this is my war after all. I can’t push all the hard work onto you.”

“I’m glad you’re willing to help out too. I’ll do my best to support you like the simple vice-commander that I am.”

I’d already gotten in too deep, but at some point, I’d have to leave the entirety of this country in Eleora’s hands. This was probably a good time for her to prove she was capable of handling it. As I thought that Eleora tilted her head and asked, “You use the phrase ‘simple vice-commander’ pretty often. Are you attached to that title or something?”

“It’s just an objective assessment of my abilities.”

I wasn’t cut out to lead, and I wasn’t skilled enough to really stand out as a commander. So the most I could do was help other people reach their goals.

In my head, I’d already christened the new castle we were building “The Flame Empress’ Snow Fortress.” In truth, Eleora’s army had already built most of the facilities a castle needed. We had fencing around the encampment, and

naturally we had barracks. If we didn't, the soldiers would have frozen to death ages ago. So surrounding all of that with walls of ice and snow was enough to make a makeshift castle. But even raising those walls was proving difficult. As I was reading over supply reports from the past few days, I heard a commotion outside. It sounded like someone was fighting. Fights happened pretty often in armies. Soldiers were all trained to fight, and this was a battlefield, so tensions were naturally high. It was an officer's job to break up fights between the men so I decided to go check out what was happening. The commotion was coming from one of the wall worksites. *Hang on, I recognize those voices. Isn't that the Garney brothers?*

"I'll fucking kill you!"

The elder Garney brother's shout echoed through the camp. His younger brother looked just as angry, and both of them seemed about ready to transform. *Please cut it out you two.* The two brothers were yelling at the other soldiers working at the site. *Wait, aren't those guys the soldiers that got exiled from Prince Ashley's army?* They'd been under the command of the traitor Earl Ryaag, and had originally served as Sveniki Castle's garrison.

"N-No! Please, listen!"

The soldiers were desperately trying to explain themselves but the Garney brothers were too angry to listen. The last thing I wanted was for this to turn into an incident so I quickly intervened.

"Hold it right there, everyone. What's going on here?"

The elder Garney brother pointed to the wall and shouted, "Veight, these bastards were trying to break the wall!"

Really? I looked over and saw a large chunk of snow had been taken out of the wall. This would definitely set work back by a few hours at least. The younger Garney brother added, "Veight, these guys are Dobienks Family spies!"

Who the heck is the Dobienks Family? Are they related to Dobby or something? You two are really good at making unintentional puns, you know that? I needed to get a better grasp of the overall situation before I made any conclusions, so I decided to first calm the Garney brothers down.

“Alright, hang on now. Let’s hear what they have to say. We can decide whether or not to punish them once we have the full story.”

I turned to the former Sveniki soldiers and they immediately launched into an explanation.

“This snow’ll melt at the very start of spring.”

“You can’t use dark snow. It’s not a stable building material.”

“It’s soft, and it melts too fast.”

Ah, I see now. Upon closer inspection, I realized the chunk of snow that had been taken out of the wall was comprised entirely of dirt-brown snow. It seemed some of the snow meant for disposal had ended up in the building snow pile. This definitely wouldn’t work. The Garney brothers naturally didn’t understand the implications of what the soldiers said, and they started shouting again.

“What does the color have to do with anything!? We’re not trying to make these walls pretty!”

“You can’t fool us with shitty lies like that! Isn’t that right, Veight!?”

I grinned at the Garney brothers.

“Nah, those guys are right.”

“See, even...wait, what?”

The younger Garney brother turned to me in confusion.

“What did you say, Veight?”

Remembering that these two were complete dolts, I kept my explanation as simple as possible, “Dark-colored things absorb light better. That means they get warmer faster. That’s why in cold countries people spread black salt over snow when they want it to melt faster.”

“Oh...”

“You really know everything...”

We never got much snow back in the werewolf village, but my grandma back on Earth had lived in the mountains. She’s the one who’d taught me about the

black salt trick. I could have stopped my explanation there, but for some reason I felt compelled to keep going.

“On the other hand, white-colored things warm slower. Remember how everyone in Beluza and Lotz wore white clothing? They wear white clothes to keep themselves cool because it’s so hot down there.”

The Garney brothers exchanged glances.

“Bro, do you remember what clothes they wore there?”

“No way, man.”

Why do I even bother? However, the older Garney brother added, “Everything Veight says is true. So just shut up and nod.”

“Gotcha, bro.”

You know I can hear you, right?

“O-Oh...yeah! I totally remember that!”

“They were all wearing white clothes! The viceroy even had white hair!”

You know he didn’t choose that hair color, right? Whatever. At least I managed to de-escalate the situation. I needed to remember not to expect much from the Garney brothers. I smiled at them and said, “Don’t underestimate soldiers born in cold countries. Anyway, you better apologize for misunderstanding then.”

“Yeah...I guess we should.”

The two of them nodded, then bowed their heads to the former Sveniki soldiers.

“Sorry, we were wrong.”

“We’re sorry we doubted you. Please forgive us.”

In the past, the two of them would never have bowed their heads to humans, but even they’d grown after spending so much time around them. The soldiers seemed taken aback by how easily the two men apologized to them. I turned to the soldiers with a smile and said, “Meraldian soldiers aren’t used to seeing snow. So we’re grateful to have experienced men like you around. You did the

right thing in removing this snow. I'll make sure you're rewarded for your diligence."

The soldiers' expressions brightened, and they sighed in relief. If they continued to pile up achievements, it was possible their sentence would be lifted and they could return to their old posts. I sent someone off to make sure every construction team knew not to use dark snow, then turned back to the soldiers.

"Still, why are you working so hard for Eleora's army? Aren't you guys members of the Doneiks faction?"

Moreover, I was responsible for the death of their lord. If anything, it would have made more sense if they hated me. To my surprise though, the soldiers smiled and shook their heads.

"It's true that we were indebted to Earl Ryaag, but now that he's dead we have no lord to serve."

"Even if we tried to flee to the Doneiks army, it's not like we're actually their men..."

"We all have families back home. We just want to get this war over with so we're free to go back to them."

From what I'd heard, Earl Ryaag had been well-liked by his men. But even then, to them, he'd been nothing more than a relatively amicable boss. In other words, they'd just been employees of the Ryaag company, which was under the Doneiks conglomerate umbrella. But they had no interest in the actual power struggle up top.

Nodding in understanding, I replied, "I see. In that case, I'll do my best to make sure your punishment is lifted and you're allowed to return to Sveniki Castle as soon as possible."

"Thank you very much."

The soldiers all bowed to me, looking somewhat terrified. Had they instinctively noticed our true nature? A few of the guards who'd been at Sveniki Castle spotted my werewolves during the raid. The fact that soldiers had been spreading stories about werewolves had actually come up in past war councils,

but no one, not even the other rank and file soldiers, believed the tales the former Sveniki troops were telling. Eleora's nobles and the other soldiers all just believed the Sveniki troops were making up excuses for why they'd lost their castle so easily. Ironically enough, they'd had their lives ruined by werewolves, but it was those same werewolves that would be their salvation.

—Prince Woroy's Misgivings—

"They're shoveling away all the snow?"

My scout's report is so surprising I end up repeating his words. Apparently, a segment of the soldiers surrounding Creech Castle had started shoveling up vast quantities of snow for some reason. At first I thought Ashley's men were so lacking in discipline that they'd started playing around, but it seems that's not the case. Especially since the soldiers undertaking this building project are the ones to the north. In other words, Eleora's troops.

Those guys have the Astral Fencer with them too. I have no idea what goes on in that guy's head, but I know he's always up to something. I walk up to the castle's watchtower and peer through the telescope facing northward.

"The fuck are they doing?"

Whoops, I slipped back into slang. The scouts and nobles standing behind me smile ruefully.

"I was unable to discern what they were doing, so I figured it'd be best to ask you to look for yourself."

"I have no clue either."

Of course, I'm this army's general. I need to be able to figure out what they're up to, or I'm not fit to lead these men.

I mull the question over in my mind while also asking my advisors for their opinions. The shore where Eleora's army is encamped is an open plain. They

have no need to get rid of the snow around them. In fact, it's better to let it sit. Shoveling away all the snow would just make it easier for Ivan's armies to reach them when his reinforcements finally marched. Meaning their goal isn't getting rid of the snow itself. They're bringing it all back to their camp to do something with it. That much I'm sure of. The question is, what exactly are they planning on doing with that snow? I doubt they're planning to melt it all to turn it into drinking water, since that's inefficient. Besides they're right next to the river that feeds into the lake. They have all the water they need. And there's no way they're just making huts to play around in. Actually, hang on... Are they planning on using the snow as a building material? It sounds implausible, but I can't think of anything else that makes sense.

"The enemy's planning on building with that snow."

"Building...what exactly, sir?"

"Ramparts of some kind. If they just wanted to make a few buildings they could chop down trees in the nearby forest for lumber."

It sounds stupid to me even as I say it. My advisors seem to be thinking the same.

"But sir, no matter how much snow they gather, they won't have enough. It would take ages for them to cart over enough snow to build proper walls."

"It may look like a lot, but once they pack it down it'll end up amounting to practically nothing. Besides, once spring comes, whatever defenses they've built will melt."

I don't need you guys to tell me that, I've got eyes too. But I just can't imagine any other reason they're stockpiling all that snow. I smile awkwardly at my advisors.

"If they're not doing this as a diversion of some kind, then there's no other explanation that makes sense. Send scouts out to see what's happening. I want to know how much snow they've got. Also, snow alone isn't enough to build proper walls. If they're serious about this, they've probably been collecting wood and earth to create supports. Have a few scouts investigate the nearby forest as well."

“Yes, sir!”

Once my men leave I look through the telescope again. I’m too far away to make out individual faces, but I have no doubt that Astral Fencer from Meraldia is in that crowd somewhere. Uh oh. I’m getting excited. I’m actually looking forward to seeing what kind of trick he’s going to pull now that he’s got Eleora’s army to work with. But of course, whatever he’s planning is likely dangerous to me and the Doneiks family. I need to stop him no matter what. However, how am I going to stop him when I have no idea what he’s planning?

Though there were occasional blips, the construction progressed mostly without incident. It looked like Prince Woroy had finally caught on to what we were doing. But he couldn’t commit to mounting an attack on us because if he showed an opening, Prince Ashley’s army would march on the castle from the south.

Our biggest concern right now was that we didn’t have enough snow. I wanted to make our walls a good deal higher than they were, enough that an attacking army would need siege ladders to scale them. Of course, that required way more snow than we could realistically gather. We were making ice using lakewater to help pad out the height, but even that wasn’t enough. We’d already gathered up all the pure snow in the area, and we couldn’t use any of the muddy snow packed closer to the ground since it’d melt too soon.

Borsche, who’d been in charge of overseeing construction, came up to me with a frown.

“Right now the wall isn’t tall enough to deter infantry. However, it’s at least tall enough now to halt a cavalry charge or block arrows.”

“So we’re going to have to organize a unit to carry snow over from elsewhere?”

As I said that, Captain Lenkov of the mage corps walked over to us.

“Lord Veight, the former Sveniki troops have something they want to report

to you.”

Guess I should go over and hear what they have to say directly. But just as I got to my feet one of the Sveniki troops’ sergeants walked forward.

“Lord Veight, I believe we’ll get heavy snowfall tonight. You should tell everyone to bundle up and keep warm. Also, tell everyone to be ready to pile up more snow tomorrow.”

The old veteran pointed a gnarled finger at a faraway mountain.

“The locals call that mountain Snow Wolf Mountain. Clouds rarely appear over the mountain in winter, but when they do it’s a sign we’re going to get a lot of snow.”

Apparently this region got huge amounts of snowfall once every few decades or so. The old soldier who gave the report had experienced one such winter ages ago. Sveniki Castle wasn’t terribly far from here, so there were a few members of its garrison who’d come from this region. I was relatively sure I could trust this old soldier’s intuition. It wasn’t like we’d lose anything if his prediction was wrong, but some men might freeze to death if he was right and I didn’t warn everyone to take proper precautions before going to sleep.

“Understood, I’ll let the men know. It looks like we’ll be blessed with more snow.” I looked down at the old warrior and added, “We’ve been saved by your squad once again. Like before, I’ll be sure to let the other nobles know that it was you who deserves credit.”

The soldier beamed. Considering how helpful they’d been I figured I should send them a bottle of wine over as a reward later. That night, there was heavy snowfall just as the old man had predicted. It came down so thick that you could barely see your hand in front of your face if you went outside. The wind picked up after a while too, turning the snowstorm into a blizzard.

“Ah, Veight. You shouldn’t be wearing such light clothing. You’ll catch a cold.”

Lacy walked over and wrapped a muffler around my neck. Over the course of this trip, she’d started acting more and more like an old grandma. After she finished wrapping the muffler around me she looked up at the sky. You’d never see snowfall this heavy back in Meraldia.

“This is even more snow than what we get in Krauhen.”

“Apparently even Rolmund only gets this much snow every few decades.”

“It’s like even the heavens are on our side!”

“It does feel a little too convenient to be a coincidence.”

We were extremely lucky to get a night of heavy snowfall—the likes of which the region only saw once in a blue moon—right as we were running out of snow. I looked over at the mountain the old man had pointed out earlier today. It lay far to the south.

“The south, huh...”

Past that mountain lay Meraldia. A certain great sage’s face flashed through my mind. After crossing the final threshold, she’d gained so much power she’d been able to manipulate the atmosphere itself. *Nah, there’s no way it’s her.* Master was likely extremely busy uniting the demon army right now. She had no way of knowing about our current predicament and even if she had, she couldn’t teleport this far. *Oh, but Ryunheit has Mitty the astrologer. It’s possible she read the stars to figure out what we needed.* But even then, it seemed too far-fetched. Lacy seemed to be thinking the same thing I was as she folded her arms and said with a pensive look, “Could...Movi be responsible for this?”

“Who knows...”

If we made it out of this war alive, I’d ask Master about it. I imagined Master flying above the mountains of Rolmund, looking down at us with a smile as she froze whatever air she passed through. If she really was here she’d probably say something like, “Fufu, when will my disciples learn to manage without me?”

It was funny how easily I could imagine Master’s reaction.

“I doubt it’s her, but we should thank her just in case it is.”

I turned southward and bowed my head. Lacy followed suit. After a few seconds, we looked up and exchanged glances.

“It’s pretty cold...” I muttered.

“Oh, that reminds me. Some people from the mage corps gave me this sweet bean soup they made. It was really good and it warms you to the tips of your

fingers.”

“That does sound good. Maybe I’ll drop by their tents and see if they have any for me.”

Tomorrow would be a busy day. *We’ll do our best, Master.*

Thanks to the heavy snowfall, we were able to build up “The Flame Empress’ Snow Fortress” into the massive castle I’d envisioned. Eleora’s army was now protected by thick snow walls which...weren’t nearly as sturdy as stone walls, but with how thick we’d packed them they’d at least suffice. They were also tall enough that they weren’t going down to anything less than siege weapons.

“The best part is, even if the walls get hit by catapults, we’ll just be able to pack the snow back in the next day.”

Kite gazed at the towering silver wall in awe.

“We can even use the stones that get lodged into the ice as part of the wall too.”

“Yeah...I guess so.”

I had no idea if it’d be that simple a matter, but this wall did at least look easier to repair than a stone wall. Since we’d been able to finish construction ahead of schedule, we had even more leeway than before. Eleora realized this as well and said, “I’m thinking of joining Ashley’s army when he heads north. I’ll take three thousand of my own troops.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Eleora? Prince Ashley’s army’s morale is in tatters.”

The nobles under Prince Ashley’s command weren’t exactly incompetent, but they were prone to shirking work. It made sense, considering they’d only backed Prince Ashley because they thought it was the easiest means of social advancement. Eleora gave me a troubled smile.

“That’s exactly why I have to go. Someone from the imperial family has to keep those fools in his army in line.”

Eleora had a point. Prince Ashley himself was stuck in the capital, so she was

the only member of the royal family capable of taking command. Prince Ashley had an older sister and Eleora had a younger sister, but neither of them were soldiers so they didn't know how to command armies. They were just regular old princesses. However, I was still worried about sending Eleora off to fight Prince Ivan.

"In that case, I'll take command. Since I'm a werewolf I'll be able to flee back here by myself even if things go south."

Eleora shook her head.

"Woroy's the best commander the Doneiks have. Someone has to keep him trapped here or he'll steamroll his way into the capital. On the other hand, if we can keep him holed up in his castle, we can wear him down in a war of attrition."

Eleora plopped a few chips that indicated allied forces down onto the map spread out between us.

"Ever since we joined Ashley's side in the war, his nobles have slowly started sending him more troops."

"So those opportunists think we have the upper hand, huh?"

Originally, the key nobles supporting Prince Ashley had withheld their support because they believed he was finished, but now they were willing to cooperate.

"You managed to stop Woroy's assault and draw the battle out. So Ashley's supporters think now's the time to show their loyalty and avoid being punished if he does win and become emperor."

Prince Ashley was a gentle man, but he wasn't foolish enough to appoint people who'd abandoned him to important posts. That was why the nobles who supported him had decided now was a good time to prove their loyalty to his cause.

"In order to keep their support trickling in, we need to show we have an overwhelming advantage. If an imperial princess spearheads this invasion into enemy lands, everyone will think we're days away from a total victory."

"I get what you're saying, but..."

Important people shouldn't be fighting on the front lines. God, this tomboy princess is a real handful. Before I could argue any further, Eleora interrupted me.

"You have to take on the hardest mission of all, defeating Woroy. But you're also more suited to that mission than I am. After all, you already proved you're a better commander than myself when you beat me."

I'm pretty sure I only won because you barely had an army at all... If we'd been on even footing, I was sure I would have lost. But Eleora kept going.

"The reinforcements Ashley's army is getting are all private troops belonging to various nobles. Their loyalty isn't to Ashley, so they're not willing to fight with their lives on the line. Plenty of them don't want to be on this expedition, period."

"What a pain..."

These guys seriously were just here to fill a number quota, they didn't want to fight at all. Unfortunately, we needed those numbers. Eleora pointed to the spot on the map designating the capital.

"But even unmotivated troops like those can be used to strengthen the capital's defenses. If we increase the number of garrisoned troops, Woroy'll think twice about attacking."

If Prince Woroy was unable to strike at the capital, his only choices would be to continue defending Creech Castle, or to retreat deeper into North Rolmund territory. Since he was leading the Doneiks' best troops, it'd be best for us if those troops just stayed holed up in the castle. After thinking about it for a few minutes, I nodded.

"If it's just stopping Prince Woroy's army from marching on anyone else, I think I can manage it. I guess you're right. You have to be the one to take your men and lead the fight against Prince Ivan."

"Thank you."

Eleora smiled. If we really were doing this, though, it was better if she had more protection.

“However, you should take ten thousand troops, not three thousand.”

“Ten thousand!?”

Eleora’s eyes widened in shock. She was always acting so stoic that I never got tired of surprising her. I picked up one of the chips next to the map and grinned.

“Right now you have seventeen thousand troops here. If all we’re doing is holing up inside our fortifications, I only need seven thousand men to hold Prince Woroy. Especially since most of your soldiers are mage corps. I don’t need a huge amount of cavalry or spearmen to be a threat.”

Theoretically, mage corps were stronger than any other soldier type when it came to defending a castle. Each one was worth more than ten spearmen. Since the attacking side needed to get right up to the castle walls, the overwhelming power of the mage corps’ Blast Canes could be used to full effect.

“I know you’re only planning on taking the troops belonging to the Originia family with you, but you should take the Kastoniev soldiers too.”

With how old Lord Kastoniev was, he’d sat this winter campaign out, but his son—in other words, Eleora’s cousin—was leading his troops. He was someone she could trust.

“Prince Ashley’s army consists of twenty thousand men. But since Prince Ivan’s managed to raise just as many, I’m worried Prince Ashley’s army alone won’t be enough to secure victory.”

“You have a point there, but...”

“Furthermore, if you have a total force of thirty thousand, you’ll be able to capture castles and forts too. We want to finish this war before spring comes, so now isn’t the time to be stingy with soldiers.”

This castle wouldn’t survive the spring, after all.

“Besides, you need enough men to safely escort you back here in case Prince Ashley’s army gets routed. If you have ten thousand, Prince Ivan won’t be able to crush you that easily.”

Eleora’s safety was just as important as Prince Ashley’s. I couldn’t have either of them dying. But while he was safe in the capital, Eleora wasn’t.

“But...”

Eleora was starting to waver, so I went in for the final push.

“It’ll look bad to future historians if the future empress’ army was a tiny speck. Take a large force and go wild. Don’t worry. I’ll defend this place with everything I have.”

Eleora folded her arms and considered my proposal for a few minutes. She then looked up at me and said, “You better not die, Black Werewolf King.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m Ryunheit’s infamous Black Werewolf King.”

I honestly wasn’t all that confident, but the right call here was letting Eleora take a ton of troops to strike a decisive blow. If she was able to bring the war to a close with her personal army, her influence would expand exponentially. Especially since Prince Ashley would be indebted to her. On top of that, she’d have the right to decide what would happen to the Doneiks family lands once they were defeated. There was no doubt that Prince Ashley’s opportunistic allies would flock to her instead. If we were lucky, we’d be able to gather allies from North, East, and West Rolmund all at once. *Heh, the throne’s not far off now. Though I guess it’s not my throne.* Seeing my smile, Eleora smiled as well.

“You really enjoy scheming, don’t you?”

“I am a villain after all.”

Really, it would be weirder if the vice-commander of the Demon Lord *wasn’t* a schemer. Plotting evil schemes was baked into my job description. Though I wasn’t nearly as good as I pretended to be at them.

“Oh, of the ten thousand men you’re taking, make sure you take the 209th Mage Corps. They’re like your personal bodyguards, so you’ll be safer with them around.”

They’d never betray Eleora. If the day ever came that they did, it meant she was so far gone that there was no saving her. Eleora seemed surprised by that suggestion as well though.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll make do with the remaining 203rd-208th Mage Corps. The guys in charge of Prince Ashley’s army have promised to loan me the 104th and 105th Mage Corps too, so I should have enough men. In fact, one of my werewolves should be bringing them over right now.”

I was worried Prince Woroy’s army might attack them while they were on the move, so I’d sent one of my more perceptive werewolves to guide them safely here.

And thus, an army consisting of 20,000 of Prince Ashley’s men and 10,000 of Eleora’s men headed north to strike down Prince Ivan. It was kind of sad that a joint East-West Rolmund army was barely the size of one of North Rolmund’s two armies, but that spoke more to how impressive North Rolmund’s army was than incompetence on either East or West Rolmund’s part. If anything, it proved that North Rolmund was straining its resources because it had prepared itself to fight to the death. But while Prince Ivan still had 20,000 troops, Prince Woroy’s 30,000 elites were trapped in Creech Castle. And naturally, soldiers didn’t grow on trees. Neither member of the Doneiks family could afford to draft many more troops. And the few they could draft were reservists who weren’t very skilled. On the day of the joint Ashley-Eleora army’s departure, Eleora walked up to me under the watchful gaze of her troops.

“Lord Veight, I’m counting on you to watch my back.”

Playing the role of her loyal subordinate, I reverently bowed my head.

“Leave it to me, Princess Eleora. I swear on Meraldia’s honor that I will defend this route for you.”

Eleora nodded in satisfaction and turned to her arrayed troops.

“As you have just heard, a foreign general from the far south has traveled all this way to lend us his aid. But proud men and women of Rolmund, we cannot let others clean up our messes. Now is the time to show the world the might of Rolmund’s soldiers.”

As always, Eleora was quite good at giving speeches. Her words spoke to her soldiers’ pride, and they all straightened their backs. They met her resolute gaze and shouted, “Glory to Rolmund!”

“We will bring victory to Her Highness!”

“YEEEEEEEEEAH!”

I waved to the troops along with Eleora, but internally I was sweating buckets.



If Eleora didn't manage to crush Prince Ivan before spring, Prince Woroy would crush my puny army the moment my castle melted. And even if Eleora did look like she was winning, I needed to hold this position or Prince Woroy would be able to ride to Prince Ivan's aid. If he struck Eleora's forces from behind, she'd be finished. Eleora and I both needed to perform perfectly for this campaign to succeed. And if we didn't succeed, we'd both be finished. We were about to pass the point of no return.

After seeing off the Ashley-Eleora army, I hurriedly returned to my castle and started organizing my defenses.

"Veight, why're you in such a rush? We just have to wait here and we'll win, right?"

Lacy seemed confused, but I shook my head.

"It's precisely because we have to wait that I'm in a rush. If Prince Woroy's going to attack, now's the best time for it."

The Ashley-Eleora army had just begun its march northward, meaning it was still close enough for Prince Woroy to hit them from behind. Furthermore, while they were in marching formation, they wouldn't be able to create spear walls or proper rows of archers. Nor would their cavalry have the room it needed to maneuver. In other words, the army wouldn't be able to display even a fraction of its full strength if Prince Woroy struck now.

"Prince Woroy has to know what we're up to at this point. He knows how to mobilize his army quickly, so if he's planning to attack Eleora, he'll move now."

While Prince Woroy was surprisingly cautious, when he did decide to strike, he moved with lightning speed. He was like a hunter. As I was explaining the situation to Lacy, a captain of one of the mage corps ran up to me.

"The mage cavalry is ready to sortie! We can send out two hundred knights at any time!"

"Perfect. Remain on standby for now! If it looks like Prince Woroy is planning to detour around our castle and head straight for Princess Eleora, strike his column in the flank!"

“Yes, sir!”

Though I don't know if just 200 will be enough to do anything... Thankfully even a well-trained army took time to sortie from Creech Castle thanks to its geography. Men marching on ice needed to proceed cautiously or the entire line could end up tripping over itself. Which meant we could still ambush them while they were on the ice. The heavy snowfall yesterday had covered the frozen lake, making it even more difficult to traverse. It was for this reason that I'd given Eleora most of our cavalry. While I was considering our options, Vodd's squad came back from their scouting mission.

“Two hundred soldiers just left the castle.”

“That's not that many. It's probably just a large scouting party.”

It would be risky for Prince Woroy to commit to a full-scale offensive currently. If Eleora's army turned around right now and struck him after he'd committed all of his troops, he'd suffer a crushing defeat. He was probably worried about that, which was why he'd sent out a scouting party first.

“Where are they headed?”

“Straight for us. They're ploughing their way through the snow right now.”

Alright, time for a little warm-up.

“Have the mage cavalry sortie! Strike down the enemy vanguard!”

“Yes, sir!”

The cavalry of the 209th Imperial Mage Corps were riding terabirds, but the other mage corps all rode horses. Terabirds were good for maneuvering around mountainous terrain, but they weren't suited for plains battles. The mage cavalry began their advance, followed by a contingent of standard cavalry. I got on a nearby horse as well and joined them.

“Ah, I knew it! Boss's going too!”

“Don't let him out of your sight! Chase after him!”

A few of my werewolves hurriedly followed after me. It looked like Jerrick and Hamaam's squads were on guard duty today. *Don't worry, I'm not planning on fighting this time. I just want to see how the battle plays out.* As soon as the

mage cavalry reached the lakeshore, they organized themselves into two rows and readied their Blast Canes. The real value of Eleora's new weapon was that it allowed for non-standard tactics like these. The enemy's military engineers were at the front of their column, clearing out snow for the infantry behind them. They were at the very edge of the Blast Canes' range, but if we were going to strike, now was the time.

"Front line, fire!"

The captains of their respective squads gave the order to shoot, and flashes of light shot out of the knights' Blast Canes. Unfortunately for Prince Woroy's soldiers, the snow made it impossible for them to maneuver.

"We're under attack!"

"Retreat back to the castle!"

"Gyaaaaah!"

Screaming, the soldiers dived under the snow for cover. A few unlucky ones were struck before they could move and collapsed.

"Back line, take aim! Fire!"

The second row of mage cavalry fired, and a few more of Prince Woroy's soldiers died. Splotches of red dyed the pure white snow. The enemies in the front were all military engineers equipped with shovels, so they couldn't fight back. The mage cavalry continued sniping the soldiers hiding in the snow. This was less a battle and more a one-sided slaughter. Eventually, the heavy bombardment combined with the weight of the recent snowfall caused the ice around the soldiers to crack.

"WAAAAH!"

A number of soldiers fell into the water, drowning almost instantly. With how cold the water was, they'd likely lost consciousness a few seconds after falling in. The mage cavalry showed no mercy though, and they continued sniping even as men were falling into the water. But even then, they only ended up killing around thirty men. Blast Canes were exceptionally powerful, but even they could only do so much at the very edge of their effective range. Especially since the bullets' grew weaker the more distance they traveled.

The remaining soldiers fled back to the castle while the military engineers were picked apart. It wasn't like massacring all of these 200 troops would change the odds very much, so I decided to call the attack off here.

"Don't give chase! Retreat back to the safety of the castle!"

I gave the retreat order and headed back to my own castle. After that disastrous scouting attempt, Prince Woroy didn't send any more soldiers out. He realized that trying to advance through the snow right now would end with him suffering severe losses. And so, the first skirmish between Prince Woroy's army and mine came to a close.

Though I'd won the first battle, I couldn't afford to get complacent, especially since Prince Woroy now had an idea of what tactics I used, as well as a relatively accurate approximation of my Blast Canes' maximum range. In fact, he'd probably sent that squad out to figure out those two things, so I couldn't say with conviction that I'd come out ahead from this exchange.

My fears proved well-founded, and that night Prince Woroy tried something new. I was enjoying a mug of hot water and finishing up paperwork when I suddenly heard a shrill noise in the distance.

"That's the dog whistle!"

I dashed out of my tent and found Monza's squad—which had been out on patrol—running toward the castle walls.

"What happened!?"

Hamaam and I hurriedly lowered ropes for her squad to climb, and they shimmed their way up the snow wall.

"Woroy's army is on the move! From what I could see he's sent out more than ten thousand men!"

"It might even be more than twenty thousand, boss!"

"They've already made landfall on the western shore. They detoured from the south to avoid being hit by our mages!"

Well, we're definitely in a tough spot now. It seemed Prince Woroy was

determined to crush my army before moving on to stop Eleora. Thankfully Monza had brought me this information early enough that I had time to formulate a strategy. I quickly ordered my army into position.

“Don’t let them realize we’ve noticed their surprise attack. Mage corps, man the battlements. Heavy infantry, shield the mages while they fire.”

I picked up my own custom Blast Cane and found an empty crenellation to fire from. Since I couldn’t transform, my visibility wasn’t all that great, but I could hear the sounds of approaching hoofbeats and footsteps in the distance. Vodd walked over to me and whispered in my ear, “Monza said she saw them carrying huge logs. They’re probably planning on using them as battering rams.”

“Shit.”

I had no idea how well a castle made of ice and snow could hold against a battering ram. In fact, it was possible that packing down the snow as densely as I had would make it even easier to crack. Of course it was just as likely that the snow would be sturdy enough to hold, but I really didn’t want to test that right now.

“203rd Mage Corps, deploy along the south wall!”

I had the units I’d held as reserves fortify the wall I figured was most likely to be attacked. With the snow slowing the enemy’s march, I doubted they’d try to risk circling around to any of the other walls. The risk of being spotted in that time was too high. After a few minutes, one of the soldiers standing atop the lookout tower shouted, “They’re here! I can’t make out their numbers but there’s definitely more than ten thousand! Their vanguard consists of light cavalry!”

Night attack or no, Prince Woroy obviously knew he wouldn’t be able to keep an assault of this scale a secret for too long. It seemed he’d come to storm the castle by force. Fahn, who was serving as my bodyguard for this fight, muttered, “Why’re they attacking now when they just lost so badly this afternoon?”

“Because they realized we’re trying to buy time.”

One of the basics of warfare was to never let your opponent do what they wanted to. Originally it had been Prince Woroy who’d wanted to buy time, but

now it was the opposite. So naturally, he'd found a way to launch an all-out attack to prevent us from doing so. But of course, I'd been expecting this. And defensive battles were my specialty.

Prince Woroy's cavalry charged, kicking up snow as they did. Judging by the fact that they were carrying shields and bows instead of spears, Prince Woroy had likely sent them out to test our defenses instead of to do any actual damage to my forces.

"Mage corps, prepare to fire! But draw the enemy in further before you loose!"

Right now the only light we could rely on was moonlight. In order to increase my squads' accuracy, I needed to let the enemy close in before giving the order to fire. It was only after they'd come within 40 meters of the castle walls that I shouted, "Back line, fire!"

Everyone in the back line unleashed blasts of light at the advancing cavalry. This was my first time seeing Blast Canes used in a night battle and it surprised me how bright the shots looked. They were dazzling. I guess that made sense since the shots were made of light magic. Still, they were more prominent than I'd expected. The enemy would easily be able to discern our positions because of this.

The bullets burst upon impact, illuminating the ground with brief flashes of light. The light was amplified as it reflected off the snow, and for a moment, the battlefield looked like it was lit by floodlamps.

"Use the light to help you aim! Front line, fire!"

The continual bursts of light made it hard to tell what exactly was going on, but I could make out soldiers toppling from their horses. Metal shields were no impediment to Blast Canes. The bullets either pierced right through the shields, or hit them hard enough to push the soldiers out of their saddles. Just then, I heard the sound of numerous objects whistling through the wind.

"Heavy infantry, raise your shields!"

The non-mage soldiers hefted their double-layered shields above the heads of the mage corps. A second later, arrows rained down on them.

“Whoa!?”

“Gah!”

A few of my men screamed, but as far as I could tell our losses were light. Fortunately, there weren't too many arrows coming down on us. Because we were huddled up directly against the castle walls it was hard for archers to angle their fire to hit us.

“Fire only under the cover of the battlements! The light from the Blast Canes makes our positions obvious to the enemy. It's too dangerous to fire outside their protection!”

Anyone who stuck their head over the walls would probably get an arrow through their skull. The cavalry retreated after a single volley, but before we could regroup, Prince Woroy's infantry began to march. Within the mess of infantry, I spotted a few squads carrying battering rams. They were made of wood, and large enough that they needed 20 people each to carry. The soldiers around the battering rams covered the transport squads with their shields. If the enemy managed to breach our walls, we'd be completely overwhelmed. The difference in numbers was too great.

“Aim for the battering rams! All squads fire at will!”

The slow-moving battering rams provided a perfect target for the mage corps. A barrage of bullets rained down on the soldiers, crushing their shields and exposing the unprotected soldiers carrying the rams to concentrated fire. Within seconds, enough of the ram bearers had been taken out that the squads were unable to continue pushing the battering rams forward. A few valiant soldiers attempted to carry them regardless, while most fled, or cowered behind the wrecked shields dropped by the shield bearers. But no matter what they did, the soldiers were easily picked off by the Blast Canes.

From what I could tell, six battering rams had already been abandoned. A small number of the rams were still moving forward, but their progress had been severely slowed. The squads carrying them had lost too many men, and they were still losing more. *Alright, the rams have been taken care of.*

All that was left now was to deal with the infantry. There was no gate to the south, so the only way the soldiers could breach the walls would be to scale

them with siege ladders. However, the snowy ground was too slippery to support ladders that tall. Furthermore, I'd posted spearmen at the walls. Their spears were easily long enough to tip the ladders backwards, causing everyone climbing them to tumble down. And even if the enemy soldiers survived the fall, they'd be turned into pincushions by the mage corps. In no time at all, the snowy field below the castle became stained with blood. But just as I was starting to think our victory secured, a messenger from the north wall ran over.

"Enemy infantry spotted to the north! We can't make out their exact numbers but there's a lot of them!"

"Do they have any siege weapons?"

"Visibility's too poor to know for sure!"

So he'd sent out a detached force even though his army here was already over 10,000 strong. Chances were he thought we didn't have that many mages and was planning to dilute our firepower by attacking from multiple sides. The messenger's face looked mildly panicked.

"The 205th Imperial Mage Corps is holding them off for now, but they don't have enough bullets!"

I'd posted the least amount of troops to the north wall. And each member of the mage corps had only a limited amount of shots they could fire before they ran out of mana. *I'm gonna need to send them reinforcements.*

"Send all the crossbowmen to the north wall! Take five hundred spearmen as well, in case the enemy manages to scale the walls!"

I'd wanted to avoid using my crossbowmen since my supply of bolts was limited, but this wasn't the time to be stingy. If this castle fell in just one day, Eleora would be doomed for sure. *If worse comes to worst, I can always transform and fight myself.* However, I'd only do that as a last resort. I still had one final trump card left to play.

I left the south wall in the hands of the mage corps and took Kite with me to the north wall. I'd already sent messengers to the other werewolves, as well as Lacy and Parker, so they were busy with preparations when I arrived.

“Is everything ready!?”

“It is.”

Parker gave me a succinct reply, his voice reassuringly calm. The only time he acted calm was when I wasn't. *I should take some deep breaths.* I looked down at my final trump card, a gatling gun version of the Blast Cane. Ryucco had developed it for me, and it was likely the world's first machine gun.

“Veight, we've finished loading it with mana! We can fire anytime!”

Lacy gave me a nervous nod, and I nodded back.

“Alright, let's get this battle over with!”

The area to the north of the fortress was densely forested, meaning I didn't have to worry about catapults or the like coming from that direction. However, the forest made it easy for smaller groups of infantry to sneak up on the castle. I'd had the soldiers cut down the trees within bowshot of the castle, but that didn't make it any less scary when swarms of soldiers suddenly popped up out of the woods. The mage corps stationed on the north wall were shooting down as many enemies as they could, but there just wasn't enough of them. Plenty of Prince Woroy's soldiers had already reached the castle walls and started climbing.

“Crossbowmen, shoot down the enemies climbing the walls! Spearmen, prepare for close-quarters combat!”

Crossbows weren't well-suited to firing straight down, but the mana recoil from the Blast Canes could damage the walls if they were fired too close to the battlements. Heaving with exertion, the Garney brothers hauled the gatling gun into a pillbox of snow.

“No need to rush! Just make sure you don't break it!”

“O-Okay!”

Once the gun was in place, us four mages prepared to activate it.

“Okay, let's do this. Kite, you locate the enemy. Lacy, relay the coordinates to me. Parker, you stay quiet.”

Everyone responded immediately. Kite cast epoch magic to locate the enemy,

using waves of mana as active sonar. He then relayed the information he found via a magic conduit to Lacy. Lacy used illusion magic to mark the locations I needed to aim for. She put a holographic map of the area up in front of me and represented the targets as red dots. Parker quietly watched from a corner. Because of all the flashes and screaming, I couldn't rely on my werewolf senses to seek enemies out. Lacy's markers were all I could rely on.

"So they're not coming directly from the north, but from northwest."

The density of red markers was greater to my left.

"Sorry, but I'm going to need all of you to die here."

I grabbed the gatling gun's lever and tried to rotate it. But it didn't budge.

"Oi, the damn thing's frozen!" I shouted in surprise. Kite turned to me in sudden realization and said, "That's because we used Meraldian oil to lubricate it..."

We'd used the same oil that northern Meraldia used, but it seemed even that hadn't been able to withstand the bitter cold of Rolmund.

"Dammit, if we don't hurry we'll be in trouble!"

Parker walked out of his corner and said, "Calm down, Veight. If the oil's frozen, we just need to heat it with fire."

Lacy replied in a panic, "B-But Parker, we don't have anyone who can use fire magic! I'll go get a torch!"

Parker chuckled.

"That's because your definition of we does not include *me*. Here."

Parker held out his palm and a small, magical fire appeared within it.

"Parker, when did you learn destruction magic!?"

"I only know the absolute basics, but I had Eleora teach me. Now come, let's get this hunk of metal warmed up. It's a lot easier to control the temperature with magic than it is with a torch."

Man, how many times has this guy saved my ass now? I once again gripped the lever and pointed the gun's muzzle into the darkness.

“Here we go!”

Regular Blast Canes were relatively quiet, but the machine gun’s barrel made an absolute racket as it rotated. On top of that, the blasts of light reverberated into the night sky as they shot forward in quick succession. *Wow, it’s actually working.* The flash from the bullets was blinding me, but Kite was using epoch magic to keep an eye on the situation.

“Direct hit! You’ve taken down four soldiers! Five now! Six!”

It looked like the gun was hitting, even if I couldn’t see a thing.

“Veight, move the barrel a little down and to the right!”

“Ah, I’ll show him the point on the map!”

Lacy hurriedly updated her map while also making it three-dimensional. Trusting in Kite’s judgment, I adjusted the gun and continued cranking the lever. Each of the countless bullets the gatling gun fired had enough force to tear off a person’s limbs. And the gun itself was fully automatic. This was one hell of a deadly weapon. However, it ate through mana at a prodigious rate, and before long the bullets began to dim.

“I need a mana resupply!”

“Use mine. The barrel should be warm enough for now.”

Parker stopped warming the gun and started pouring his mana into it. Within seconds, the shots of light regained their lustre. In that short time, the enemy had already made it to within a few meters of the castle walls. The members of the mage corps swapped from sniping to luring enemies close and bringing them down at point-blank range. Fortunately, there were so many targets that they didn’t need to aim much. Meanwhile, the regular soldiers hurriedly restrung their crossbows for the next volley. They had to brace the bow with their feet to pull the strings back so even the fastest of them couldn’t reload very quickly. During the time they were reloading the spearmen pressed forward and tried to tip over as many siege ladders as they could.

Unfortunately, the enemy had managed to get quite a few latched on, and the covering fire provided by Prince Woroy’s archers started doing significant damage to the spearmen. There were so many soldiers swarming around the

base of the castle that I didn't even need to aim. I could just start mowing squads down.

"Take this!"

I started shooting into the densest clumps of enemies. At the same time, I began pouring my own mana into the gun as well, in order to keep it fully charged. I'd already concluded that I wouldn't need to transform to end this fight, so I saw no need to hold any of my mana back.

"Veight, enemy reinforcements coming from the left!"

"Got it!"

The moment I swung the barrel around, a new knot of soldiers burst out of the woods. It looked to be a platoon of infantry. My hail of bullets tore through them, ripping them to shreds. In seconds, half of the men were down. Ignoring the rest who'd turned and ran, I switched targets to another densely packed squad of soldiers. Even as I fired, I kept an eye on the situation and continued giving orders.

"One of you messengers run to the south wall and see how they're doing! Hamaam, you go guard the east wall! Monza, you take the west!"

I had no idea how long I'd been fighting. It felt like it'd only been a few seconds, but I was certain it must have been more than that. Before I knew it though, there were no more enemies assailing the north wall. Wounded soldiers groaned in the blood-red snow while those who could still move ran for the safety of the forest. They'd lost the will to fight. Kite used his epoch magic to confirm how many people were left around the castle. After a few seconds, he sighed in relief.

"I don't sense any movement... All the enemies attacking the north wall have retreated."

"Perfect."

It was possible they'd regroup and launch a second assault, but we'd at least managed to buy ourselves some time.

"Mage Corps, take a short break to catch your breath! But remember to stay

vigilant!”

A person’s mana recovered faster when they weren’t panting. Most of the mage corps stationed on the north wall had burned through all of their mana, and I’d need them to get as much back as possible if the battle continued. I left Kite in charge of the north wall and ran back to the south wall.

“Kite, if they attack again you man the gatling gun! Watch out for stray arrows!”

“G-Got it!”

Upon returning to the south wall, I discovered more than half of the mage corps here were out of mana as well. But at the same time, the enemy’s assault had weakened. The field below—which was still being illuminated by the mage corps shots—was littered with corpses.

“Good work, mage corps! Everyone too drained of mana to shoot step back and catch your breath! Have the corps stationed on the east and west send two platoons here each!”

For some time longer, this hellish battlefield continued under the bewitching light of the full moon. But once the enemy learned their detachment to the north had been routed, they sounded the retreat. Prince Woroy’s men were well-trained, and they carried out an orderly retreat in a speedy manner. Before long, the castle was silent. Wiping snowflakes off his face, one of the members of the mage corps turned to a nearby crossbowman.

“D-Did we win?”

“No clue...”

The crossbowman stopped reloading his bow and turned to me.

“Lord Veight?”

I strained my ears, making doubly sure that all sounds of battle had vanished. Kite ran over to me and nodded, confirming that everyone had indeed retreated. I puffed out my chest and said with a smile, “We’ve won, gentlemen.”

The soldiers stationed along the walls burst out in cheers.

The morning after the battle we went out to inspect the battlefield. We'd managed to avoid being breached, so our casualties were surprisingly low. We only lost eight men. All of them had been spearmen who'd had to lean over the walls to fight. There were a hundred more wounded, but thanks to the exceptional skills of the mage corps' healers, all of them would survive. Furthermore, over half of the eight dead men came from the squad Prince Ashley had banished to us. They had truly given their all to protect this fortress. I hadn't posted them to a particularly dangerous section of the wall, so their disproportionately large casualties were proof that they'd gone above and beyond the call of duty.

On the other hand, the enemies' casualties had been staggering.

"About four thousand, huh," Parker muttered softly.

"We found around two thousand corpses at both the north and south walls, so that sounds about right."

The detachment that detoured around to the north wall had been small, so they'd suffered a greater percentage of casualties. It had been too dark to make out any specific details, but they'd probably fought harder than the troops attacking the south wall. In order to let my men rest, I'd asked Parker to take care of the corpses. He'd turned them all into zombies and had them walk away. Chances were they'd all reached the lakeshore by now. I'd wanted to bury them, but burials in a snowy field like this took a lot of time and effort. Though zombifying them wasn't the most respectful treatment of the dead, I had no other way to return them to Prince Woroy. *I guess I don't have any right to lecture Master about her treatment of the dead now.*

"Oh yes, Veight. Rigor mortis is beginning to set in, so I can't move the corpses any further. Though the cold will at least prevent their bodies from rotting."

"It'd be nice if their bodies weren't picked apart by wild animals, but I guess taking care of them isn't our responsibility. This is good enough. Thanks, Parker."

I didn't even know how many favors I owed him now. I felt a little bad for

relying on him as much as I was, but he was just so dang reliable.

From what I could gather, Prince Woroy had sent around 20,000 men to attack yesterday. Of them, he'd lost 4000. Those casualties weren't crippling enough to put an end to his army, but they were a significant blow nonetheless. Especially since Prince Woroy's troops likely had low morale after that crushing defeat. They hadn't even managed to make any strategic gains. My guess was Prince Woroy had around 26,000 men left in Creech Castle. His force was still a good deal larger than mine, and it'd be a serious threat to Eleora if he managed to get past us. My job was far from over. But what I didn't realize at the time was that my victory here would have repercussions I couldn't have predicted.

"Thank God Prince Ashley's good about keeping correspondence."

I smiled as I read through the letter that had been delivered today. It wasn't a secret message but rather an official, public correspondence. Initially, I was afraid it had been intercepted and replaced by a fake, but the contents seemed genuine. Apparently, the nobles supporting Prince Ashley had finally started recruiting troops in earnest. They'd managed to raise a whopping 70,000 troops. I couldn't even fathom what an army of that size looked like. Kite finished reading over the letter after I did, then cocked his head.

"Why're they suddenly being so cooperative?"

I smiled bitterly and replied, "The answer's simple: because Prince Ashley's doing well. He probably used our victory the other day as negotiation leverage."

Everyone was talking about how I'd repelled an army of 30,000 with just 7,000 men. Of course, the truth of the matter was that I'd specifically selected mostly mage corps members—troops skilled in defending fortifications—to stay behind in my army, and the force we'd fought had actually been only 20,000 strong. Still, the story made for good advertising.

"Seeing a Meraldian general win a decisive victory with Rolmund troops probably lit a fire under those opportunistic Rolmund nobles' asses. They don't want to be shown up, after all."

"Haaah... Well, their help is coming way too late."

“Tell me about it... If those nobles had sent that army sooner, I could have taken it easy.”

I had plenty of complaints about Prince Ashley’s supporters, but for now I’d gladly take the extra reinforcements. That being said, the army the nobles raised looked a lot more impressive than it was. Most of the 70,000 men were serfs with practically no training. They’d just been handed spears and crossbows and told to march. From the sound of it, they didn’t even know how to form battle lines. Prince Ashley stressed in his letter that I shouldn’t expect much from them.

However, it seemed my victory had stirred the heart of the populace, and a bunch of volunteer soldiers offered to protect the capital from the “evil Doneiks Family.” They were mostly amateurs as well, but it was still nice to know that we’d have more troops we could mobilize in case the capital was attacked. It appeared that Prince Ashley was quite popular with the common folk. Kite handed the letter over to Parker and Lacy, and the two of them leaned close to read it.

“They’re embellishing Veight’s accomplishments again, Parker.”

“That they are. Though this time the rumors are being spread by Prince Ashley himself. So these exaggerated accounts will end up in history books now.”

“I wish he wouldn’t do that. Eleora’s working way harder than I am.”

I showed Eleora’s letter to my fellow mages as well.

“She’s managed to whip Prince Ashley’s crappy army into shape and has already taken four castles. Two of them even surrendered without a fight.”

Kite looked at me in amazement.

“She sure gets fired up when it comes to war, that princess.”

“I guess she’s just happy to have someone she can fight without feeling bad about it.”

Apparently the members of the Kastoniev family that were supporting Eleora were doing a pretty good job themselves, too. I had no way of knowing for sure what had happened on the battlefield, but Eleora must have done something

dramatic to get them all fired up. That was my guess, at least.

“Eleora’s making good progress toward Kinjarl Castle, which is where Prince Ivan is located. But she said she’s not sure if she’ll be able to return by spring.”

“That’s not good. If we end up fighting Prince Woroy on the open plains, we’ll get demolished,” Parker replied in a carefree voice. Once spring came the snow would melt and we’d lose our castle.

Still tired from the earlier battle, Lacy gratefully accepted the cup of tea Kite offered her. Tea was a luxury good out here on the battlefield, but it was important to let my comrades indulge in such luxuries from time to time or their morale would drop. Lacy took a sip of tea, then said, “Oh, but if Prince Ashley’s supporters have raised an army of seventy thousand, can’t we get them to come here instead?”

“No, that won’t happen.”

I sighed. Before Eleora departed for the front, I’d had her post Meraldian flags on the forts and castles held by Prince Ashley’s army. I’d wanted Prince Woroy to believe reinforcements from Meraldia had arrived. I’d also had the soldiers garrisoned in Prince Ashley’s castles make tons of extra snow huts for people to camp in. The reason Prince Woroy hadn’t committed his full 30,000 men to the night attack was probably because my tactics had worked. He was afraid there was another unknown force camped out nearby, so he’d left a good number of his soldiers to defend the castle. That was all well and good.

“Those seventy thousand layabouts are just hunkering down in the snow huts I made. They haven’t moved from there.”

The opportunistic nobles leading the army just wanted to say they supported Prince Ashley’s campaign. They didn’t actually want to fight Prince Woroy’s elites. Fahn chewed on the bacon I’d given all my werewolves as a special reward for winning the battle, and sighed.

“For how much humans like to fight, they’re really cowardly. It’s so weird.”

“If humans were as fearless as we are, they’d have died out... Still, this is pretty pathetic.”

The nobles supporting Prince Ashley swore loyalty to him, but they weren’t

officially under his command. Had that army gone to invade Meraldia instead, our towns and cities would have been carved up by whichever nobles managed to get them first. It was terrifying to think about.

“Well, we can’t expect anything from our ‘reinforcements.’ So it just means we’ll have to take Prince Woroy down ourselves.”

If that army of 70,000 couldn’t be used in combat, I’d just find some other use for it. All I needed was an opportunity.

Just then, the Garney brothers who I’d sent on patrol returned to the castle. They shook snow out of their hair and dashed up to me with a smile.

“Whoa, you’ve got bacon! Is this what everyone was eating outside!?”

“Yeah, it’s been smoked in white cherry chips. This flavor’s my favorite.”

The two brothers inched toward the pile of bacon, completely forgetting to report to me. I cleared my throat and said, “Oi, where’s your report?”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot.”

The older Garney brother didn’t take his eyes off the pile of bacon Fahn was distributing out to everyone. *I know you wanna eat, but so do I. Hurry up and get your report over with. That way we can both eat.* The older Garney brother finally turned to me.

“We found human footprints around the northeastern part of the lakeshore. They were headed straight north.”

“It’s probably five or six people at most. They left sometime last night, and there’s no footprints showing that they came back. The footprints just keep going straight toward the town in the north.”

The younger Garney brother provided a more detailed explanation as I exchanged glances with everyone.

“That’s too many people for them to be spies delivering a message, and if they were scouts they would have returned by morning.”

Fahn handed me a slice of bacon and I bit into it, savoring its salty goodness. It had been so long since I’d last had decent meat. Licking my lips, I mulled over

the Garney brothers' report.

"Let's expand the range of our patrols tonight. We'll cover as much ground as we were when we were intercepting spies."

"Hey Veight, is it bad that those people went north?"

I shook my head in response to the younger Garney's question.

"If my guess is right, it's actually a good thing. I'll join your patrol tonight."

"You just wanna leave the castle, don't you!?"

No, no, this is all an important part of the mission.

That night, I discovered that my hunch was correct. While out on patrol, I spotted a group of soldiers take off their armor, drop their weapons, and sneak away into the night. Deserters. I didn't know why there were deserters, but it seemed like Prince Woroy was bleeding men. *Alright, time to do what werewolves do best: show up out of nowhere.*

—Deserters in the Hut—

The pleasant aroma of cooked meat filled the snow hut.

"Man, I know we owe a lot to Prince Woroy and all, but..." I muttered, and my friend nodded emphatically.

"Yeah, His Highness is a good person. He's nice, he listens to us, and he's friendly."

"But you know..."

I sighed.

"I really don't wanna die here..."

The person we were talking to was a mild-mannered young man. This hut belonged to him and his companions; a single lantern illuminated the inside. The man we were talking to seemed to be a merchant of some sort, and he'd

shared some of the bacon which appeared to be his goods with us. We put it inside the bread we were given as rations and stuffed ourselves full of delicious bacon. *Aaah, I finally feel alive again.*

“If you’re going to die, you’d rather die fighting for a cause that matters, right?” The young merchant replied. *I like the way you think.*

“That’s right. If this war was actually gonna help the Doneiks Family rule Rolmund, we would have gladly kept fighting.”

“Yeah, it’s not like we’re cowards. We didn’t even flinch when we charged Crimson Snow Keep.”

“Crimson Snow Keep?”

The young man cocked his head, and I exchanged a glance with my companion. I really didn’t wanna remember that fight.

“You see, Princess Eleora has this vice-commander she brought over from Meraldia. Anyway, that guy managed to build an entire castle out of snow right next to Creech Castle.”

“Oho.”

I’d never forget how terrifying that night had been. There was no way I could face such terror again.

“We thought we could take it since it was just a castle of snow, but he started blasting us with this strange magic. It was like one of North Rolmund’s extreme blizzards, but ten times worse!”

“Yeah! Those Blast Canes or whatever that Princess Eleora developed are crazy strong. One of the shots hit my captain and blew his upper body straight off!”

That battle had truly been a nightmare. I knew it was only thanks to Sonnenlicht’s grace that I’d survived that hell. The young man chewed over our words for a few seconds, then nodded gravely.

“It sounds like you guys had it rough. Here, I have some booze. Let’s drink to celebrate your guys’ survival.”

The merchant pulled out a bottle of beet wine, an East Rolmund delicacy.

Everything that came from East Rolmund was sweet, so there was no doubt this beet wine was sweet too. And right now, I could use a little sweet in my life.

“Hehe, thanks friend.”

The merchant’s snow hut was situated in an open spot near the road. While the hut kept the elements out, it couldn’t really be called warm. A bit of booze sounded wonderful right now. I gulped down the glass the merchant poured me, eating strips of bacon in between each swig. Now that I was far from the battlefield, I could feel my humanity returning to me. It only now hit me how homesick I was. The kind young man poured me another cup of wine and asked, “Are there a lot of deserters like you guys?”

“Yeah. The enemy doesn’t have enough soldiers to encircle the lake. So if we wanna run, now’s the only time.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause Prince Ashley’s gotten serious. I heard he raised an army of seventy thousand elites. They’re probably marching on us as we speak. Once they get here, the whole castle’s gonna be surrounded.”

If Prince Ivan won everything would be fine and dandy, but if he lost we’d be branded traitors. There was no telling what’d happen to us if we were captured. Or if Prince Ashley would even bother capturing us instead of slaughtering us. The only smart choice was to return home and pretend I’d never participated in the war. I was sure my fellow villagers would back up my lie. I said as much to the young merchant, and he nodded to himself.

“I see. That certainly is true. What does it matter to peasants like us who sits on the throne. The most important thing is keeping ourselves out of trouble.”

“You said it. Besides, we’ve had enough of fighting.”

My buddy nodded in agreement.

“We barely survived that hellish battle at Crimson Snow Keep. I’ve done enough already.”

“I heard the guy in command is one hell of a crazy bastard. Apparently they call him the Astral Fencer over in the capital. Supposedly no one’s ever been

able to beat him in a duel.”

“Rumor is he’s not even human.”

“Yeah. People are saying Princess Eleora signed a contract with some kind of war god from across the Slave Peaks.”

“Apparently all the people who live way south of the mountains are demons. I hear the escaped slaves are suffering under their rule too.”

The young merchant’s face went through a kaleidoscope of emotions as we told him our tale. Once we were done, he asked, “What’s this general’s name?”

“Uhh what was it again? Vai...Vaich? No, it sounded Meraldian...Veight?”

“Yeah, that was it. The Astral Fencer, Veight!”

“The bloodthirsty lord of Crimson Snow Keep, Veight!”

The merchant continued plying us with food and drink, making us feel welcome. But we couldn’t stay forever. This wasn’t our hut after all.

“We should probably get going.”

“Yeah. We need to make it to town before the sun rises.”

“Thanks for the meat and wine. That was your merchandise, wasn’t it? It’s not much, but here’s a token of our appreciation.”

We held out a few silver coins, but the merchant didn’t take them.

“It’s fine, I don’t need any money. It’s only natural to help those in need.”

“You’re...a real nice fellow, you know that? Oh yeah, what’s your name? I forgot to ask.”

The man smiled and walked out of the hut. *Guess he’s gonna see us off?* But then he spoke, and I realized how wrong I’d been.

“My name’s Veight.”

All of us fell silent and exchanged glances.

“Veight?”

“What...”

This is a joke, right? A second later, my arms were yanked behind my back and I was pinned to the ground. One of the man's companions had grabbed me. *Weren't his friends all sleeping!? When did they wake up!?*

"Huh!? Wh-What's going on!?"

"What's the meaning of this!?"

I was still having a hard time believing this was real, but the man pinning me down didn't seem to be joking around. Furthermore, he was clearly well trained. The man who'd called himself Veight smiled innocently.

"As repayment for the meat and wine, I'm gonna have you answer a few more of this Astral Fencer's questions."

You've gotta be kidding me!

I did my best to calm the terrified deserters down.

"Now, now, no need to worry. If I was planning to kill you, I wouldn't have given you my food and wine. I would have just killed you."

Originally I'd been planning on letting them go without revealing my true identity at all, but it looked like these guys knew more than they'd been willing to divulge. I needed to get as much information out of them as I could. After a tense Q&A session, I discovered that the men were overseers working for the Bolshevik family, one of North Rolmund's most influential noble families. *Bingo.*

"Aren't the Bolsheviks close to the Doneiks family? Are you sure you should be running away while Prince Woroy is still fighting?"

The soldiers exchanged glances. One of them said in a small voice, "Lord Bolshevik was against this war from the start...but some of his relatives married into the Doneiks family, so he sent us to fight for them."

Prince Ivan's mother was from the Bolshevik family. The Bolsheviks were the second strongest family in North Rolmund after the Doneiks, and they were also the Doneiks' staunchest allies. It was no coincidence that the late Lord Doneiks

had taken a wife from the Bolshevik family.

“Besides...” muttered one of the other soldiers, as he looked up at me with a sorrowful expression. “I heard Princess Eleora started marching north. I’m worried she might have attacked my village.”

“Ahh, I get you...”

I gave the soldier a sympathetic look. Their families and livelihoods were back in their villages, not here. Nodding in understanding, I added, “Even if you win this war there’s no point if your village gets destroyed, right?”

The soldiers nodded vigorously. *But well, Eleora’s the one in charge of that army. She won’t harm civilians unless there’s a vital strategic reason to.* I gave the deserters a reassuring smile.

“Her Highness Princess Eleora is a wise ruler. I can say for certain that she won’t allow anyone in her army to loot or pillage. So long as you surrender to her when her army comes, you’ll be safe.”

I asked the soldiers a few more miscellaneous questions. The most useful thing I managed to glean was what they thought of our magical guns. The concept of infantry equipped with Blast Canes had only just begun permeating throughout Rolmund. Because producing the weapons was difficult, and it took a long time to train skilled shooters, they were considered inferior to crossbows. Those were the two main reasons why most of Rolmund’s armies hadn’t opted to start using them—and the main reason the soldiers had been unprepared for the power of Blast Canes. They’d charged the walls expecting to face something similar to crossbow bolts, but instead were hit with a barrage of machine gun fire.

During that battle, I’d discovered the gatling gun was a far more dangerous weapon than even I’d anticipated. It drained copious quantities of mana, but demons like me or Parker—who possessed quite a bit of mana—could use it to devastating effect. Chances were, in a few decades, war in this world would evolve into trench warfare. Battlefields would become dangerous killing fields where poking your head out of a trench would mean instant death. From there, tanks would be developed to overcome the defensive fortifications of trenches, and history would follow a similar trajectory to the two world wars back on

earth.

At any rate, what this meant was that Prince Woroy's soldiers were now terrified of our firepower and their morale was plummeting. War hinged on the emotional stability of its soldiers, so their fear would have a huge effect on the battles to come. Prince Woroy was probably tearing his hair out right now.

"Once you get back to your villages, lay down your weapons and do as Princess Eleora asks. I'll be sure to tell her to treat Lord Bolshevik with mercy."

I made sure to drive that point home, then released the soldiers. To be honest, I probably wouldn't even need to say anything to Eleora. Knowing her, she was already working on winning Lord Bolshevik over. As we watched the soldiers vanish to the north, Hamaam muttered, "Are you sure you should have let them go, Vice-Commander? We wouldn't have lost anything by killing them."

"True. If anything, it might have been more efficient to kill them."

Corpses couldn't stab you in the back, after all. But still, I shook my head.

"They might be useful to us alive. More importantly though, I don't want to foment any unnecessary resentment."

"You might end up having to deal with even worse grudges because you left them alive."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Yeah." Hamaam smiled bitterly. "You've probably figured out that I used to be a former bandit, right?"

"Yeah, it'd be hard not to."

Hamaam didn't talk much about his past, but I had more than enough circumstantial evidence to know the truth.

"It was my policy not to kill any more than strictly necessary either, but because of that, I became a wanted man and had to flee my old home."

"So that's how you ended up with us."

I'd been wondering what had caused Hamaam to come to our village. I

examined Hamaam's expression, then grinned.

"But you don't regret your choices, do you?"

Smiling, Hamaam nodded.

"Yeah, I don't. If I started killing women and children, I wouldn't be a bandit or a werewolf—I'd just be a monster. Besides, it's because I ran away that I got to meet you."

Aww, you're making me blush. I patted Hamaam on the shoulder, then turned to the rest of his squad.

"Those deserters will start spreading stories of what's happening at Creech Castle. They'll tell the people in their village that Prince Woroy's on the brink of defeat, and that they need to run."

Now that they'd become deserters, they had no choice but to justify their desertion somehow.

"As those stories spread, the people will begin to believe that Prince Woroy's army is in much worse shape than it really is. Once that happens, they'll stop resisting."

My werewolves nodded in understanding.

"I see. You really are a scoundrel, boss."

"Yeah, you really know everything about those cowardly humans."

I couldn't help but give them a rueful smile.

"That's because I've learned a lot from that cowardice of theirs..."

I was a coward, both in my past life and in this one. However, the members of Hamaam's squad misinterpreted my words as scholarly learning and just thought me wise for learning from the Great Sage. Feeling embarrassed, I quickly changed the topic.

"Keep wringing information out of any deserters you find. A single report can't be trusted, but if they're all saying the same things then we know there's a kernel of truth to their confessions. I'm counting on you guys."

"Yes, sir!"

While Prince Woroy's soldiers' morale continued to drop, our soldiers' morale started skyrocketing.

"The next time they attack, I'm gonna shoot down twice as many enemies!"

"Oh, so two soldiers? They've got like three times as many troops as we do, so you better kill at least three next time, man!"

"Hahahaha!"

The mage corps joked around with each other as they performed maintenance on their weapons. Jerrick, who was working on his own Blast Cane, turned to me and cocked his head.

"Hey, boss."

"Yeah?"

"Why're they all in such high spirits?"

I smiled at Jerrick and replied, "When Eleora first developed her magic weapons, the empire's generals were reluctant to let mages join the army."

"Uh-huh."

"So they put rules in place saying the only equipment mages could use were staves, grimoires, and daggers for self-defense."

Rolmund's generals had wanted to use Eleora's powerful magic weapons, but they hadn't wanted to let mages touch them. They were stubbornly set in their old ways.

"So Eleora redesigned her Blast Lances into Blast Canes. She insisted they were a kind of staff, so mages would be allowed to use them. But while her plan worked, it ostracized mages within the army."

"Damn, that sucks. These are such good weapons, too."

Jerrick furrowed his brows. As a blacksmith, he was unhappy to see such inspired designs go to waste.

"That's why all the mage corps are so happy they were able to win an overwhelming victory over a massive regular army."

The mages were aware of their own strength, and now they'd finally been able to show that strength to the world.

"They now know that as long as they serve under Eleora, their talents won't be squandered. They'll be able to win honor and prestige, and they won't end up dying a dog's death. On top of that, they'll even get proper equipment."

"Oh yeah, I saw some of the Blast Canes they're using in Woroy's army. They look like shit. You're better off using those things as clubs than as guns."

A lot of the deserters had started selling their weapons and armor in nearby villages, and we'd managed to secure a good chunk of them. However, as Jerrick had said, their Blast Canes were all inferior, barely functional versions of our own. Both their range and their power paled in comparison to the ones Eleora's army used.

"Yeah, the magic circles drawn on the barrels are sloppy, and they're made with low-quality magesteel. I guess North Rolmund just doesn't have as good a production line as East Rolmund."

Since Eleora was the one who invented magic weaponry, it made sense that her homeland would have the most efficient and advanced production line for them. She'd been cautious enough to keep her own production process secret as well, so only she knew how to make the best-quality weapons. The fact that only she could mass-produce high-quality modern weaponry would be an important factor in this political struggle.

Now then, what's Prince Woroy's next move going to be? His closest allies were still loyal to him, and his core of elite soldiers hadn't deserted. I couldn't afford to let my guard down. Unfortunately, he was in such a precarious position that I couldn't actually predict his next move.

"Prince Woroy should be backed into a corner right now."

Today, like every other day, I was keeping watch on Creech Castle from the ramparts. Kite, who was by my side, leaned tiredly against the ice wall.

"They did only manage to get one attack on us so far."

"Well, they'll suffer heavy casualties if they storm the castle in earnest, and with how much time has passed, there's not even much strategic value in taking

the castle down anymore.”

Kite leaned down and started building a miniature snowman.

“So how do we beat Prince Woroy then, Veight?”

“No clue.”

“Even you don’t know?”

More like because it’s me, I don’t know. I had no doubt someone smarter than me could easily figure it out. However, I still gave Kite a smile and said, “But I do have an idea of what the prince is currently thinking.”

“Really?”

“His strength as a strategist is being able to figure out the one thing his opponent least wants him to do.”

Prince Woroy used not logic, but his own intuition to read the thoughts of his enemies. It was a skill he’d inherited from his father.

“So chances are the next thing he’ll do is the one thing we don’t want him to do. In that respect, he’s easy to read.”

So long as we prepared for the worst-case scenario, we’d be fine.

Fortunately for us, Prince Woroy moved exactly as I’d hoped.

“Prince Woroy has marched out of the castle with twenty thousand men! He’s heading north!”

One of the werewolf squads out on patrol came back to me with that report. The prince had left a few thousand men to defend the castle, and taken the rest of his forces north. *Don’t you think you’re being a bit too obvious, leaving in the middle of the day like this?*

“Why would he retreat now of all times?” asked Kite, as he gave me a confused look.

“Right now the most dangerous move Prince Woroy can make isn’t holing up in his castle or trying to invade the capital, but rather, to try to pincer Eleora’s army.” Which was of course why Prince Woroy had chosen to do just that.

“There’s one other reason though.”

“What’s that?”

“During our last battle, we showed his army how overwhelming our weapons are. But at the same time, we made it obvious that they’re only this devastating when protected by walls and trenches.”

In truth, I had basically no cavalry. Even if I’d sent infantry to chase the routed enemies, they would have had time to regroup before the infantry caught up. Furthermore, the mage corps that made up the core of my army were unsuited to battles in open plains. The only units I could send in pursuit of a marching army were my 200 cavalry, 5,000 spearmen, and 1,000 crossbowmen. The 800 or so mage corps that I had were effectively useless.

Of course, a force of 6,000 could still do decent damage to an army of 20,000 if I caught them while they were marching. But if they’d instead set up an ambush, my army would be annihilated. And according to the report I’d gotten from my werewolves, Prince Woroy’s army was marching suspiciously slowly. It seemed to me that they were actively trying to lure us into attacking them. Granted, it was possible the army was just marching slowly because Prince Woroy knew setting a fast march would cause more men to desert. Still, the situation seemed too perfect. I was certain it was a trap.

“Where’s Prince Woroy’s main force located?”

“We spotted his flag and a group that looks like his honor guard at the rear of the cavalry line.”

In other words, he was serving as the rearguard. There was no proof he was there with his honor guard, but it definitely looked like he was trying to make his army as appealing to attack as possible. *Yeah, this is definitely a trap.* But when he was offering such a juicy target, I felt compelled to attack him even knowing it was a trap. Especially since if I let him escape here, Eleora’s job would get that much harder. My only option was to harass his forces as much as possible.

“Let’s do this, Veight!”

“We can take out Woroy right now, boss!”

My werewolves were overflowing with bloodlust, but I still wasn't sure.

"Calm down," I said. "The only reason we won last time was because the enemy didn't have an accurate grasp of our strength. And because we utilized our Blast Canes to their full potential."

If I sent the mage corps to chase Prince Woroy now, they'd be fighting out in the open. Having ranged light infantry fight an army without any protection at all was tantamount to suicide. Fahn calmed the excited werewolves down, then turned to me.

"But Veight, if we let him go here Eleora'll be in trouble, right? You are getting ready to send everyone out, right?"

"I am, but..."

I looked down at the letter in my hands. It had been brought by one of Eleora's spies. If she managed to pull off what she was suggesting in her letter, we could probably crush Prince Woroy's army. But if she didn't, we'd be defeated. Still, a defeat here wouldn't cost me too many men. And so long as my mage corps survived, I'd still be able to hold the ice castle. *Alright. I'm still a little scared, but let's do this.* I got to my feet and turned to my werewolves.

"Everyone! Are you willing to trust me with your lives?"

They all grinned at me.

"Course we are!"

"You're the leader of our pack. Your word is law."

"We're all gonna die eventually. So we may as well die fighting."

If nothing else, they were true to themselves. I made up my mind. And so I said, "Alright, we're gonna chase after the army. It's time to bag ourselves a prince's head!"

"Yeaaaaah!"

We were up against a massive army this time, so if things went south, there'd be casualties among my werewolf unit. All I could do was pray everything worked out.

I left the castle at the head of my cavalry unit. There were only 200 of them, so the cavalry alone wouldn't be enough to do any significant damage to Prince Woroy's army. Furthermore, the 5,000 spearmen trailing behind the cavalry were all traveling as light as possible. They weren't carrying any rations or spare clothing. Normally, it'd be impossible to chase an army on such little equipment.

"Spearmen, bring only your shields and spears with you. If you can't keep up, ditch your armor and your swords."

"Are you kidding me!?"

"If you have to in order to keep up, drop your spears and shields as well!"

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

Prince Woroy's army was currently marching north along the highway. Since the highway was hemmed in by forest on one side and mountains on the other, they'd been forced to narrow and stretch out their marching line. If we struck their rear, less than 10,000 of the 20,000-strong army would even be able to join the fight. The rest wouldn't be able to deploy because of the constricted terrain. However, Prince Woroy had put all of his cavalry—his most mobile forces—in the rear. He was prepared to wheel about for a counterattack at any time.

As expected, Prince Woroy's army was ready for us. The moment they spotted my pursuit unit, they changed formation. The spearmen did an about-face and formed a wall while the cavalry spread out to the wings. Prince Woroy was using the same formation he had at Nodgrad. This was probably his favorite battle strategy. Aside from the fact that he had no archers, his formation was solid. And while I couldn't get an accurate count, it looked like he'd assigned around...5,000 men to intercept us. *Wait, that's not that many...*

"Lord Veight, enemies up ahead!"

"I saw. Cavalry squad, prepare to charge!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Pretend like you're going to crash into their lines, but pull back at the last moment!"

“Yes, sir!”

Perfect, my cavalry knows how to follow unexpected orders. We charged the enemy, who was sandwiched between mountains and a forest. A few stray bolts shot towards us, but as far as I could tell, there was no organized archer squad, just a few knights who happened to possess crossbows. The arrows were few and far in between, as well as wildly inaccurate.

We got close enough to brush against the enemy’s spears—okay, perhaps that was a bit of an exaggeration—then wheeled around and started retreating. As expected, the cavalry on both wings charged after us. These were Prince Woroy’s best men. At a glance, there looked to be around a few hundred of them. Definitely more cavalry than I possessed. Their spearmen followed up as well, running after the cavalry. Me and my men galloped back as fast as we could, joining up with our own spearmen. As I passed the spearmen I yelled, “Everyone, run into the forest as fast as you can! Drop your weapons if you have to!”

My men reacted instantly, breaking formation and dashing for the trees. Some of them took my advice and dumped their weapons. Because of how light they were traveling, they were able to run pretty fast. As a result, everyone was safely within the forest well before the enemy cavalry reached us. Even when they were inside the forest, my spearmen didn’t stop running. They were headed straight for my ice castle. *Now then, time for me to do my job.* I leapt off my horse and lay down in the chilly snow. It was surprisingly comfortable. A few of the other men who I’d been riding with dismounted and crouched down around me. They were all members of my werewolf squad. Still lying down, I smiled at them.

“You guys worried?”

The werewolves shouldered their custom Blast Canes and grinned back at me.

“Yeah, I’m worried you’ll kill all of them before we get a chance to have our fun.”

“Hahahaha.”

I glanced back and saw that the enemy cavalry had stopped in front of the forest’s entrance. While the mage corps struggled in open fields, cavalry had

trouble navigating tight spaces like woods. Horses needed space to accelerate to the speed of a devastating charge, and forests were too dense for that. Naturally, Prince Woroy's elites were aware of that, and they were being appropriately cautious. But when the enemy spotted me lying on the ground they forgot their caution and dashed into the forest. From their perspective, it seemed like the enemy commander had fallen off his horse and was protected by only a scant honor guard. Of course they knew it was likely a trap, but just like me, they couldn't resist bait this juicy. Without getting up, I pulled out a dog whistle. *Come to think of it, I've had this thing ever since we conquered Ryunheit.* I brought the familiar whistle to my lips and blew.

"Buddha have mercy on your soul."

"What's a boo-da?"

One of the werewolves cocked his head. Before I could reply, a shriek cut through the woods. A second later the horses whinnied in fear and soldiers screamed as flashes of light whistled through the air.

"Waaaaaaaah!?"

"Enemies! We're under attack!"

"But where are they!?"

"Dunno, just run!"

Sorry, but it's too late. I got to my feet and ordered, "Alright guys, let's go! Kill them all!"

"WOOHOOOO!"

A dense forest was the perfect hunting ground for werewolves. My men used the trees, the undergrowth, and even the snow as cover as they jumped on the cavalry from all directions. Unlike foot soldiers, knights on horseback couldn't maneuver in tight spaces. They were trapped in a forest full of werewolves out for their blood.

By the time those in the rear of the line realized something strange was happening up front, it was too late. Before they could even turn to flee, my werewolves sent their heads flying. Whenever they found it too difficult to

approach an enemy, they'd cancel their transformation and shoot them down with their Blast Rifles. They stuck to the treetops when sniping, knowing that the knights' lances were suited for frontal attacks, and couldn't be swung vertically like a sword.

My job was to take care of the wounded, so I moved to the rear and watched as my werewolves went wild. Unlike them, I didn't particularly enjoy fighting, so this role suited me just fine. Anyone who got hurt came to me and was healed in seconds, so our side didn't have to worry about casualties. Before long the sounds of fighting subsided, and the thick stench of blood filled the woods.

"We did it," the older Garney brother said as he walked up to me, wiping blood off his crimson fur. "Those guys were nothing. I'm pretty sure we slaughtered every knight that came into the forest."

"Perfect, how did everyone's squads fare? I need to know if anyone got hurt."

I imagined if anyone had been hurt, their squad members would have brought them to me immediately, so I assumed everyone was fine. Ambushing humans in a forest was our specialty, so if anyone had messed up here they didn't deserve to call themselves a werewolf. Only 100 or so cavalry had entered the forest, the rest were waiting outside. Actually, I couldn't see them from here, so it was possible they'd even retreated. The enemy's spearmen weren't advancing into the forest either. I'd been hoping to lure everyone into the forest and toward the castle so I could have my mage corps wipe them all out, but it looked like the enemy wasn't that stupid.

Considering how few men Prince Woroy sent after us, it was likely he was prioritizing returning to Prince Ivan over exterminating us. He made it look like he was trying to lure us into an obvious trap, when in reality there had been no trap and he was trying to march away as fast as possible. We might have won the battle itself, but this had been a strategic victory for Prince Woroy. He'd managed to buy himself time. Master of psychological warfare that he was, he'd already taken into account that I was a coward and would be too afraid of a trap to commit my entire forces against him. *Sorry I'm such a coward.* But unfortunately, the only way I knew how to fight was picking battles in such a way as to avoid allied casualties.

“So what now, boss? You’ve got another amazing plan, right?” Jerrick walked up to me, cradling his Blast Rifle.

“I wish I did. We don’t have the troops to keep chasing the prince.”

“Oh, come on.”

“They outnumber us three to one, and they’re cautious. If we chase them too far we’ll get annihilated. You guys cancel your transformations and rest.”

“Seriously?”

Jerrick, who was always so composed, was looking at me like I was crazy. Of course, I had no intention of just letting Prince Woroy leave. After all, this was the perfect opportunity to bring him down.

“Send messengers to the fort. Tell all the crossbowmen and mage corps still waiting inside to sortie. Make sure they don’t forget their white cloths!”

“Yes, sir!”

“I want half of the spearmen to go back and defend the castle. The other half’ll stick with me. Cavalry, go to the shore of Creech Lake and stand by.”

I really hope this plan works.

—Prince Woroy’s Resolve—

I continued marching north with my Imperial Guard while waiting for the unit I’d sent to pursue Lord Veight to return. There was little meaning in fighting a pitched battle here. As long as my cavalry scared Lord Veight’s forces a little, that was enough for me. I just hoped they’d return soon. One of my knights raised his visor and gave me a worried look.

“Those mage corps are devastating. My unit will remain here in case the enemy continues their pursuit.”

I smiled and shook my head.

“No need. Those mages aren’t as all-powerful as they seem. Soldiers good at defending tend to be weak at attacking. Troops who specialize in holding castles are bad at pursuing enemies.”

Mage corps were only good at ambushes and castle defense. I’d had a feeling that was the case from the start, but I hadn’t been sure until I fought them.

“Thanks to our previous assault, I know that a good chunk of Lord Veight’s army is comprised of mage corps.”

Considering how many shots they’d fired into my troops, Lord Veight must have kept most of them when Eleora left. But that meant he had proportionally fewer troops who weren’t mage corps.

“Plus, the troops pursuing us haven’t fired any shots of light. Meaning all of the mage corps are holding the castle. Lord Veight has only brought a few troops to pursue us. I doubt he’ll chase us any further.”

As expected, he’d been cautious in engaging us. Despite how flashy his actions seemed, he was a cautious man. Almost like a wolf. As I was thinking that, another one of my knights argued back, “But, Your Highness, you are still this army’s commander. Please at least go to the front. Allow us to take over the duty of guarding the rear.”

“Nah. When you guys aren’t by my side it feels like I’m flailing about the battlefield naked. I can hardly shed my armor in order to speed up my march. We will advance together.”

“Your Highness...”

Stop looking so sad over every little thing I say! This is a battlefield. I turned to one of my messengers and ordered, “Have the vanguard speed up. There’s no need to be vigilant anymore. We won’t be attacked again. Speed is our main priority now. I want to reach Bolshevik land before the sun sets.”

Lord Bolshevik was my cousin, and it was his younger brother who was currently leading the vanguard of my army. No matter what village we stopped in, I was certain he’d provide us with food and shelter.

Just then, a horseman galloped toward me from the north. It was Jovtzia, one of my generals. He also happened to be a cousin on my mother’s side, and the

younger brother of Lord Bolshevik, the commander of my vanguard.

“Woroy! Woroy! We’re in trouble!”

“What’s wrong!? Why did you come here!? Where’re your spearmen!?”

Panting, Jovtzia brought his horse level with mine and said, “It’s my brother! Lord Bolshevik has betrayed us! Or rather, he’s surrendered to Eleora!”

“He what!?”

You have to be kidding me! Lord Bolshevik was kin! My mother was a Bolshevik! I’d been sure that he wouldn’t betray us, but it seemed that he had. But now that I thought about it, I realized that even if we tried to sugarcoat it, we were rebels. We had no just cause for this war. And if justice wasn’t on our side, the only way we could keep our allies loyal was to keep winning and prove that we were stronger. Otherwise, our supporters would begin deserting us. The moment I’d failed to conquer Crimson Snow Keep, my brother’s cause had been doomed. This was all my fault. Jovtzia dismounted and prostrated himself before me.

“I’m deeply sorry! My brother likely surrendered because he was worried Eleora would kill him! He’s already ordered the six thousand spearmen under my command back to his castle!”

This isn’t good. Not good at all.

“Raise your head, Jovtzia. Those troops are Lord Bolshevik’s men. Their retreat isn’t your responsibility. But even if he’s surrendered, Lord Bolshevik will at least let us pass through his lands unmolested, right?”

“Well...”

I was able to guess my cousin’s answer the moment I saw his expression. We wouldn’t be able to return north. The only path to Doneiks territory was this highway that cut through Bolshevik land. It was, in fact, the Bolshevik family who guarded this road. Since Lord Bolshevik had surrendered to Eleora, our path north was cut off.

“I know this is unforgivable! Please, cut my head off! My brother needs to be shown what his folly has wrought!”

“Calm down, Jovtzia. That’ll just have the opposite effect.”

I was glad Jovtzia had a strong sense of responsibility, but I really didn’t want to kill my own cousin. It’d leave a bad taste in my mouth.

“Lord Bolshevik isn’t to blame, either. He was only doing what he needed to protect his family’s honor. You should also return home, as per his orders. As a noble, it’s your duty to put your people and your family’s safety above everything else.”

Jovtzia looked up at me.

“You...have a point, but then what will you do?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Protect my own family’s honor.”

I forced myself to smile. *Now then, how do I get out of this one?* Since I just lost 6,000 spearmen, I only had 14,000 troops left. I could no longer count on resupplying in Bolshevik land, and there was no guarantee my former ally wouldn’t attack me. My troops would slowly become more and more exhausted if I continued marching.

What was left of my army was in no shape to fight the Eleora-Ashley joint army. My unbalanced army, bereft of spearmen, wouldn’t stand a chance against that tomboy Eleora. In the past, I thought she’d been as cute as an angel, but now she’d transformed into an angel of war. Furthermore, if I tried to force myself through Bolshevik lands, Lord Bolshevik might be driven to openly lend his support to Eleora and give her his troops. In fact, the timing of his surrender was far too convenient to be a coincidence. Chances were he’d been negotiating with Eleora for a while. He’d chosen now to openly declare his betrayal because now was when he could safely recall his troops. And if he’d planned that far ahead, there was no doubt Lord Bolshevik had set a trap for me if I continued advancing. Continuing north was no longer an option. I would almost certainly die if I did. However, I couldn’t turn around and invade the capital either. Even if they were all amateurs, the capital now had 70,000 men defending it. My only option was to recall my troops and retreat to Creech Castle. I’d left a garrison of 5,000 men there, as well as all of my wounded. I couldn’t just abandon them.

Now that I’d made my decision, haste was of the utmost importance. I turned

to my guards.

“Send messengers to the troops up front! All men are to turn around and retreat to Creech Castle! If we continue marching we’ll be whittled down by the Eleora-Ashley army’s attrition tactics! Our only hope is to return to Creech Castle and hope my brother brings reinforcements to save us!”

Though I doubted Ivan would be able to save us.

Our situation might have been dire, but I still had one shot at turning the tables.

“Imperial Guards follow me! This is our one chance to take down Lord Veight! We’ll buy our troops some time and also defeat the enemy commander!”

“Yes, sir!”

If I can just take him out, his mage corps won’t be as much of a threat. I had no doubt he’d come up with the idea to build a snow castle too. If I let him run free, there was no telling what he’d do next. We had to strike Lord Veight down here and now, or the Doneiks family had no future. Considering how much he loved being on the front lines, I was certain he was still hiding within that forest somewhere. Ashley’s second army was advancing slowly and still hadn’t reached Creech Castle. If I was able to crush Lord Veight’s army, I’d face no immediate threats, giving me time to reorganize and formulate a new plan.

“Our veins run thick with the blood of warriors!” I declared. “Our horses are fiercer than any dragon, and our lances sharper than any blade! We have nothing to fear! Now is the time to strike down the lord of Crimson Snow Keep and etch our names in the annals of history!”

“RAAAAAAAAAAH!”

‘Only those who never give up survive to fight until the very end.’

That simple maxim had been one of my father’s favorites. *Alright, Veight, let’s do this!*

I watched through my telescope as Prince Woroy's army turned around and started heading back towards us. Because of how small the road was, his troops needed to march in a narrow column. However, all of them were marching in combat formation. They were prepared for any ambushes we might spring on them. I retreated to the safety of the trees and blew my dog whistle again. The mage corps split into 20-man platoons and covered themselves with the white cloths they'd brought to blend in with the snow. The 208th Imperial Mage Corps was situated close to the edge of the forest in order to snipe soldiers on the road, so they especially needed the camouflage. My post was right next to them.

"Ignore the first ranks of knights passing through," I told the mage corps.

"The terrain around the lake is disadvantageous for them. They'll be useless in a siege. If they wanna go back to the castle, let them. They're not a threat."

"Yes, sir!"

Everyone looked relieved to learn they wouldn't have to fight against the knights. I didn't blame them. Cavalry were terrifying.

"You can ignore the pikemen as well."

"Are you sure?"

Pikemen were both less mobile and had less range than the mage corps, so they made for perfect targets. The corps captain gave me a confused look, and I explained further, "My scouts have found that the enemy's archers are all in the rear. They're the ones we want to eliminate first."

Longbowmen could rain arrows down on us if we tried to attack their castle, and if they came to attack us, they'd be able to fire over our walls. They were the soldier type best suited for siege warfare. I didn't want any of them making it back to Creech Castle. Fortunately, the forest we were hiding in helped protect us from archers, so this was the perfect place to ambush them. They'd be stuck in the open, while we had an entire forest to use as cover. If I wanted to take out Prince Woroy's archers, now was my only shot. *I just hope they don't spot us too soon.*

I had people hiding within tree trunks, people hiding in the branches, and even people hiding in the snow. There were so many people hiding at the edge of the woods that the little noises they were making as they breathed and shifted sounded like a cacophony to me. But while their noises sounded loud to my werewolf ears, my opponents were just humans. Humans wearing heavy, clanging armor to boot. They probably wouldn't hear anything. We waited in the shadows of the forest, looking for our opportunity.

The knights came first, their shields held high. They warily eyed the forest, but all of them passed by without seeing any of my men. After them, the pikemen followed. They carried spears three times their height, and moved slowly enough to present a perfect target for the mage corps. As easy it would be to wipe them out, we needed to let them pass for now. *How much longer until the archers get here...*

Not long after I had that thought, I heard two long whistle blasts a short distance away. A few seconds later, the signal was repeated. This was the sign that Prince Woroy was approaching. While I wanted to save my men for the archers, the army commander was an even bigger prize. *Alright, time to change targets. We'll take out Prince Woroy. Sorry prince, but I can't afford to hold back this time.*

I'd attached a werewolf to each of the mage corps platoons, so I could use my dog whistle to convey orders to them, and they could convey those orders to the mages. I gripped my whistle and peeked out of the thicket I was hiding in. Prince Woroy was riding down the road, flanked by his imperial guards. It was definitely him. Though he was pretty far still, he was within the mage corps' maximum range. I blew two long notes on my dog whistle, then three short ones. The signal meant "Change targets to the prince."

The mage corps trained their Blast Canes on Prince Woroy's guards and opened fire. Countless bullets of light peppered the knights. The bullets pierced through their heavy armor, sending them sprawling from their horses. Those that remained upright quickly got into battle formation.

"Enemy attack! Disperse!"

"They're half a bowshot out!"

It was obvious from how fast they reacted that they'd been expecting an attack. The mage corps' initial volley hadn't thinned their numbers as much as I'd hoped it would either. The knights that had been struck were all knocked off their horses, but at least half of them were relatively uninjured and got back to their feet in seconds. The mage corps noticed that as well, and they seemed to be shaken by how ineffective their volley had been.

"Lord Veight, the enemy's unhurt!"

"Calm down, they're just wearing defensive gear! Fire one more volley, then fall back!"

"Y-Yes, sir! All units, prepare for a second volley! Aim for the center of the cavalry! Fire!"

Blast Canes shot out magical bullets, which meant magically enchanted armor could easily deflect them. However, it must have cost a fortune to outfit all these knights in enchanted armor. On top of that, a few shots would be enough to pierce through even enchanted armor. A poor person like me couldn't even fathom using such wasteful tactics. However, wasteful or not, they were proving effective.

I had the 208th Mage Corps retreat into the forest, hoping the enemy would be lured into the woods. Right now their options were either to retreat to Creech Castle, or charge our position. If they charged, I'd have my mage corps whittle them down until their numbers were low enough, then finish them off with my werewolves. On the other hand, if they retreated, I'd let them pass. Chasing Prince Woroy too far would lead to my unit getting wiped out.

My guess was that the Imperial Guards would take Prince Woroy in retreat, while another unit chased us to buy them time. As long as the party sent to chase us was comprised of infantry, they wouldn't be able to catch up to us. Mage corps traveled light, so they'd be able to outrun longbowmen or pikemen. However, the enemy's next move was one I didn't expect.

"Charge!"

"Cut them all down!"

Yelling, the Imperial Guards rushed into the forest. For a moment I thought

they'd forgotten all about their mission to protect Prince Woroy, but then I saw the prince himself at the center of the charge. Brandishing his spear, Prince Woroy shouted, "Doneiks' cavalry are the strongest in the empire! I have no need for cowards! Follow me only if you have the courage to fight to the death!"

He was a model knight, but he was also being needlessly reckless. We were fighting in a snow-covered forest. There was no terrain less suited for horses than this. Prince Woroy's cavalry wouldn't be able to mount a proper charge in here. The ground was so uneven that I hadn't even been able to bring my gatling gun here. On the flip side though, there were plenty of places for us to hide. I brought up my Blast Rifle and shouted, "Continue shooting as you fall back! The enemy's enchanted armor won't last long! A few shots should be enough to pierce it!"

The mage corps valiantly fought back against the charging knights. Prince Woroy's cavalry were all wearing brightly colored overcoats in order to distinguish themselves from their allies. Unfortunately, that also made them stand out in the forest. On the other hand, my men were all camouflaged with white cloth, so it was hard to even see them until they started shooting.

While the 208th Mage Corps fell back, the 207th came out of hiding and fired another volley. A few of the knights who had made it deepest into the forest fell to the ground. Once they got their shots off, the 207th followed the 208th in a retreat. But then the 206th came out of hiding to fire their volley. After that the 205th did the same, and so on.

Every time a new mage corps fired, more of Prince Woroy's knights fell. Of course, my troops didn't get out unscathed. Those who were too slow to retreat were rewarded with a spear in the back. And those who accidentally retreated into open ground got run down by enemy cavalry. Furthermore, a few platoons got pincered by Prince Woroy's knights and were wiped out wholesale. With how poor the footing and visibility was, it was difficult to orchestrate an organized retreat. Even I had no idea what the overall situation looked like.

"There he is! It's Lord Veight!"

"Bring down the commander of Crimson Snow Keep!"

Oh boy. The moment one knight shouted that, all of the others turned around and started congregating around me. I had no idea why they were focusing so hard on me, but at least this let me buy some time for the mage corps to escape. *Bring it on.* I took aim at one of the charging knights and fired my Blast Rifle. The mana I poured into it turned into a sphere of light and shot out toward the knight. I scored a direct hit. Though the knight blocked the shot with his shield, the force of the bullet forced him out of his saddle. However, the knight broke his fall with a roll and instantly got to his feet. *They really are well-trained.* But before the knight could take more than a few steps, I fired another shot at him. This time his shield shattered when he blocked. The force of the explosion knocked him onto his back, and he didn't get up. But in the time it had taken me to eliminate a single knight, a few more had appeared in the clearing I was in. The few members of the mage corps who were nearby were trying to stop them, but their accuracy was dropping. It was difficult to aim at someone who wasn't charging straight at you. You needed to be able to aim at the spot they would be in a second later. And right now, every knight in the vicinity was charging at me. *This might be bad...*

"Protect Lord Veight!"

"Keep the enemy at bay!"

The mage corps members stopped retreating, formed into lines, and began firing again. *Wait, don't fight! I'll be fine by myself!* If worse came to worst, I could always transform and escape.

"Fire! Fire everything you've got!"

"Show those Doneiks bastards the pride of the mage corps!"

You really don't have to.

"Don't falter men! Our target is just one man!"

"We'll gladly lay down our lives for the sake of His Highness Prince Woroy!"

You really don't have to do that either. I really wished people would stop fighting over me. I could only watch helplessly as a massive melee broke out, revolving around me. Apparently some of the other mage corps members had heard that I was in trouble and came back to help me as well. Bullets of light

streaked through the gloomy forest like shooting stars. On the other side, knights charged fearlessly into the barrage, hell-bent on killing me.

The sight looked uncharacteristically picturesque, even though in reality people were dying everywhere. Or more specifically, people on one side were dying. Since the knights were charging only at me, my allies had circled around behind me, making it easier to aim. Their bullets shot past me, striking down the knights bearing down on me. Now that it had come to this, it was probably safer for my allies if all my enemies knew where I was. Steeling my resolve, I got to my feet and clambered up a nearby boulder. In the loudest voice I could muster, I shouted, “Those who cannot see me, listen! And those who can, behold! I am Veight Gerun Friedensrichter—the fearless Astral Fencer! Face me if you dare!”

Almost instantly, knights started converging on my location. Their horses kicked up clouds of snow as they charged at me. The only way out now was to kill them all. I shouldered my Blast Rifle and started firing away. On one side there was a charging wall of cavalry. On the other was a line of gunmen firing off blasts of light.

As the battle continued, it became clear which side had the advantage. Avoiding the knights’ spears was a simple task for me. Thanks to my elevated position, it was hard for them to hit me. Cavalry charges were meant to mow down knots of infantry situated at ground level. They weren’t suited to hitting targets above them. Unfortunately for the knights, the barrage of Blast Cane shots was so thick that they didn’t have time to leisurely draw their swords and target me with more precise attacks. If they didn’t charge, they’d get shot down before they even reached me.

Good, good. Keep coming straight at me. I didn’t mind being the sole focus of my opponents, since that meant there’d be fewer casualties among my allies. Occasionally a crossbow bolt would fly my way, but knights weren’t archers, and they were firing from horseback, so their aim was atrocious. Besides, I’d cast arrow-warding magic on myself anyway just in case.

Before long, the sounds of fighting began to fade. Looking around, I realized the enemy’s numbers had thinned considerably. We’d shot down plenty of knights, but an even larger number had retreated out of range. Their main goal

was to buy time, so they saw no need to throw their lives away in a hopeless charge. *Smart call.*

What they didn't know, though, was that most of my mages were practically out of mana. After that fierce battle, they didn't have too many shots left in them. Though our losses were slight, we still hadn't managed to complete our primary objective. Prince Woroy was still safe, and we hadn't annihilated his archers. While these knights were buying time, the rest of Prince Woroy's army was making it safely back to Creech Castle. We may have done some serious damage to Prince Woroy's cavalry, but at this rate, we'd be back to a stalemate. Just as I thought that, I heard Monza shout, "Boss, it looks like we're not done yet! Enemies incoming!"

I stopped strategizing and looked up. A number of the remaining cavalry had regrouped a short distance away and were reforming their lines. From the looks of it, all of them were part of Prince Woroy's elite honor guard. There were no regular soldiers among them. They numbered a few dozen at most. *Do you guys seriously wanna keep going?* The mage corps fumbled with their Blast Canes, trying to take aim as quickly as possible. They hadn't been expecting a second charge either.

"Anyone who can shoot, take aim!"

"Draw them in as close as possible before firing!"

I started shaping my mana and readied my Blast Rifle for another volley. I had enough mana left over for a few shots, but I didn't want to spend all of it. If I drained myself completely, I wouldn't be able to heal any wounded allies. All of the platoons let the enemy come in as close as possible before giving the order to fire.

"Steady... Now! Fire!"

"Platoon 3, fire!"

"Platoon 5, take aim! Fire!"

Each platoon's captain knew what the ideal range was, and they waited until the cavalry had come into it before giving the order. Intermittent bursts of gunfire peppered the imperial guards, and each volley caused more of them to

drop. Slowly but surely, their numbers were being whittled down. Honestly, I felt bad for the knights who were being one-sidedly slaughtered.

Just run, you idiots! Don't throw your lives away. It was only when the knights were whittled down to fewer than 10 that I realized what was going on. Riding at the very center of the formation was a knight bedecked in expensive armor. All of it was enchanted as well, and the standard engraved into the breastplate made it obvious that the knight in the center was Prince Woroy. *No way!* The commander in chief of an army charging the enemy formation with just his honor guard was unheard of. I was flabbergasted.

On the flip side though, I was outside the safety of my snow walls, and my guards were all out of mana. And while I doubted Prince Woroy had planned for this to happen, my werewolves were all scattered as well. This was the most vulnerable I'd been since the start of this war.

"Fire!"

The last remaining platoon to fire launched their volley, and the knights moved in front of Prince Woroy to protect him.

"Your Highness, stay safe!"

"Use our lives to grasp victory from the jaws of defeat!"

I clearly heard the imperial guards' dying words. *Are you telling me Prince Woroy sacrificed his entire retinue of elites just to create this one chance!?* The prince raised his lance and shield and charged directly at me. His warhorse was one of the finest I'd ever seen. It was entirely possible it'd be capable of jumping straight onto the boulder I standing on.

"Everyone, protect Lord Veight!"

"I don't care if you're out of mana, keep firing!"

The platoon captains desperately shouted orders to their drained mages. A few bullets shot toward Prince Woroy, but the moment they hit him his armor and shield glowed, dispersing the light shots. His armor had clearly been enchanted with greater protection than his knights. In fact, the glow surrounding him spread outward, creating a shimmering barrier that continued to stop all bullets heading his way. He looked like a shooting star streaking

across the earth.

“VEIIIIIIIGHT!” The prince shouted as he charged. *What’s the point in throwing your life away to kill me? I’m just a measly vice-commander. Not some great general worth the life of a prince.* Yet, it was clear Prince Woroy had sacrificed everything just for a chance to strike me down.

“Blast! Protect Lord Veight with your own bodies if you have to!”

“Lord Veight, please escape while you still have the chance!”

My men pleaded with me to run. To be honest, I could easily escape this situation. As long as I transformed, I could outrun Prince Woroy’s warhorse. Hell, I wouldn’t even need to run. I could just take him out. However, I couldn’t afford to show my true form to these soldiers. More importantly though, a Rolmundian prince had bet everything just to obtain a chance to challenge me one-on-one. If I ran here, the people of Rolmund would lose faith in me, and by extension in the nobility of Meraldia.

Fine, if you want a duel that badly, I’ll give you one. I won’t transform. I flung my cape back and leapt off the boulder. In a voice loud enough to be heard throughout the forest I shouted, “Cease your fire! I’ll face the prince myself! Nobody interfere!”

Though I couldn’t see his expression, I was almost certain my proclamation caused Prince Woroy to grin. I didn’t know how I knew, I just did. I gripped my Blast Rifle like a sword, and held it up in front of my face. In Rolmund, this was the formal pose you took before engaging in a duel. Prince Woroy twirled his lance, which was the standard response to indicate the duel was accepted.

His smiling face flashed through my mind. He wasn’t a bad guy, and I really didn’t want to fight him. But I had no choice. That being said, I wasn’t skilled enough at swordplay to deflect his spear, and I couldn’t use my Blast Rifle for its intended purpose since his armor was enchanted. The aura of mana Prince Woroy was wreathed in made him seem like the last boss of some RPG. There was no way a single hit would be enough to pierce through. Hell, a clean hit probably wouldn’t even cause him to flinch. To make matters worse, even his horse was protected by that magical aura.

What do I do? How do I beat him? Wait...hang on a second. There’s one spot

that isn't protected. Realizing something I probably should have from the very start, I quickly sprung into action.

I quickly made a few gestures with my left hand and cast a binding spell on my right arm. Normally, this spell was meant to be used on opponents to seal their movements, but I was casting it on myself. The spell caused everything from my shoulder to my wrist to stiffen up, turning my arm into a hardened rod of steel. Once that was done, I thrust my Blast Rifle forward. The rifle was so long that normally I wouldn't be able to hold it steady like this, but I'd locked my arm in place using binding magic. Thanks to that, my aim wasn't wavering in the slightest. Ideally I would have cast binding magic on both of my arms, but I needed one hand free to make the gestures necessary to activate spells.

I planted my feet firmly on the ground and turned so that as little of my body was facing Prince Woroy as possible. The prince continued hurtling toward me, looking like a shining comet. It was obvious he wasn't planning on returning alive from this duel, even if he succeeded in beating me. His barrier of light protected him from any of my light shots. And his spear would reach me in another three seconds. In my human form, I wasn't confident I'd be able to dodge it. To an observer, it looked as though Prince Woroy had every advantage.

However, there was one weak point he hadn't accounted for. That weak point was the very same thing he was trying to skewer me with. The tip of his lance. His lance was long enough that half of it was jutting out of his protective barrier.

I aligned the barrel of my rifle with the tip of his lance. The way I saw it, Prince Woroy would have to constantly have it aimed at me, or he wouldn't be able to hit me. And while the tip of a lance made for a small target, so long as it wasn't moving, I'd be able to accurately aim at it with my bound right arm. Since it seemed Prince Woroy wasn't thinking about anything beyond this one attack, all I needed to think about was making it past this one attack.

An instant before his lance ran me through, I pulled my Blast Cane's trigger.



A bullet of light slammed into his lance at point-blank range. The resulting explosion of light momentarily blinded me, and I couldn't accurately follow what happened next. All I knew was that Prince Woroy's riderless warhorse dashed past me, causing my cape to billow in a gust of wind. Which meant I wasn't dead.

When my sight finally returned, I saw Prince Woroy lying face-up on the ground. The tip of his lance was gone, and the rest of it had been split all the way down to the hilt. Normally, knights couched their lances close to their chest to stabilize them, as well as make it easier for the rider to absorb the impact of striking an enemy. As a result, though, the force of my bullet had traveled through Prince Woroy's lance and into his chest, knocking him out of his saddle.

Looking at the massive dent in his breastplate, it was obvious the impact had been pretty potent. There was no doubt he'd broken a few ribs at least. I couldn't tell if he was still alive or not, but I was certain he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon if he was. Falling off a charging horse was dangerous enough to be potentially fatal. Even Prince Woroy's armor wouldn't have been enough to protect him completely from the impact if he hadn't braced himself properly to cushion his fall. Still, it was possible some of his ribs had caved in and pierced his organs.

Oi, you better not be dead. If possible, I wanted to save his life. I strode over to the fallen prince, my right arm still raised at an awkward angle. To be honest, I wanted to stop holding this chuuni pose, but moving my arm while my binding magic was still active was impossible. And since I'd used pretty much all of my mana in that clash with Prince Woroy, I wouldn't be able to cast a counterspell until I rested for a bit. Though I wanted to heal him as soon as possible, it didn't seem like I'd be able to for some time at least. As I reached Prince Woroy, the mage corps behind me got to their feet and started shouting to each other.

"Lord Veight's won!"

"He beat Prince Woroy with one of Princess Eleora's Blast Canes!"

"Long live Lord Veight and Princess Eleora!"

"Woaaaaaaa! He actually beat a knight on foot!"

Soldiers started spilling out of the nearby thickets, or from under snowbanks. They raised their ammoless Blast Canes high and cheered.

“Lord Veight! Lord Veight!”

“Long live the Astral Fencer!”

“The magic-using Astral Fencer!”

Their resounding cheering was loud enough to make the trees shake. To be honest, I wished everyone would leave me alone, since I was still stuck in this ridiculous pose with my arm outstretched. Fighting off my exhaustion, I wearily raised my left hand to quiet the cheering soldiers.

“Gentlemen, our war is not yet won. However, we lack the strength to pursue the enemy. So for now, let us take Prince Woroy prisoner and return to our castle. All squads, gather up your wounded and retreat!”

“Yes, sir!”

As I sighed in relief, I realized something. If I’d just cast binding magic on my left arm instead, I probably could have held the Blast Rifle in both hands, since my right hand’s my dominant one. If I ever have to do this again, that’s what I’ll do.

“Oi, wake up Lord Veight.”

I felt someone shaking my shoulders, and groggily opened my eyes. *What was I doing again? Oh yeah. Healing Prince Woroy.* Sitting up on the bed in front of me was Prince Woroy. He was half-naked wrapped in bandages, and had his arms folded across his chest.

“What kind of fool falls asleep at the foot of his enemy’s bed? It’s like you’re asking to be killed.”

“Oh, my apologies, Your Highness.”

Crap, I let my guard down. Unfortunately, it was really easy to let your guard down around Prince Woroy. That was the scary thing about members of the Doneiks family. They were all so damn charming. Prince Woroy seemed unconcerned by my rudeness and instead said, “Spare me the honorifics. I lost

to you, and now I'm your prisoner. As the enemy general, you shouldn't be treating me with respect."

"You have my deepest apologies, Prince Woroy."

"Didn't I just say to drop the honorifics? No polite speech, either. Besides, I have no right to be called a prince anymore."

It's kinda hard to change how I address you all of a sudden, you know.
However Prince Woroy continued glaring pointedly at me, so I reluctantly changed the way I addressed him.

"Very well—err, I mean, alright. Happy now, Woroy?"

"Yeah, I am. That's much better."

Woroy grinned at me. Even when he was covered in wounds he looked dashing. The prince flexed his fingers and stretched his arms, checking to see how much lasting damage had been done to him.

"Honestly, I can't believe I'm still alive."

"Indeed. Incidentally, your ribs were in much worse shape than your arms, Prince...I mean, Woroy."

The force of my Blast Rifle had been compounded by Woroy's own charge, and the crux of that impact had been centered on the handle of his lance. The handle had been resting against his breastplate, so naturally that impact had been transferred to his chest. Had his armor not been of the highest quality, he would have died.

"Oh, and while your warhorse suffered a few bruises, he's mostly fine. I healed him as best as I could, so he should make a full recovery."

The fact that Woroy had managed to cushion his fall despite taking a blow that should have knocked him unconscious was proof that he was a master warrior. It would be a shame to lose such a talented man. Having seen his strength as a commander, as well as his individual prowess, I could see why he adored warfare so much.

Woroy gave me a bitter smile and said, "I'm the younger brother of a traitor. What point was there in healing me? I'm just going to be executed anyway."

As if I'll let that happen. Do you have any idea how popular you are with the citizenry? Most of Eleora's soldiers had even asked me to spare Woroy's life.

"I won't let you die. If I let a man of character like you be executed, I'd be besmirching Meraldia's honor. I'll make sure you stay alive, no matter what it takes."

"I'm not worth as much as you believe."

"And you underestimate your worth. There are few men as valiant and heroic as you."

I sighed, and Woroy sighed back at me.

"Like you're one to talk."

What's that supposed to mean? Woroy glared at me and said, "If anyone's underestimating their worth, it's you. What were you thinking, naming yourself to my knights?"

"Even if I die, there's plenty of people capable of taking my place."

"Like hell there is! Are you daft!?"

You're one rude POW, you know that?

"Besides, you have no right to judge me! You're the one who went and charged my mage corps with just your honor guard!"

"That's because it was worth trading my life for yours if I could manage it! We might both be commanders of our respective armies, but you're way more valuable than I am!"

If we were to use a chess analogy, I'd be nothing more than a knight. Meanwhile, Woroy was definitely at least a rook. Actually, considering his contributions to Prince Ivan's war, he was probably closer to a queen. Trading a queen for a knight wasn't worth it in the slightest.

"I respect your skills as a general Woroy, but you're definitely overestimating my worth."

"No, you're underestimating it. And the fact that you are probably gives your men headaches, so stop pretending like you're less important than you are."

“I’m really not that important.”

“Yes, you are.”

The two of us were merely going in circles now. Just then, Fahn popped into the room. She placed a wet towel and a washbasin on the table beside Woroy’s bed, then looked over at me.

“You are that important.”

Traitor. How dare you betray your fellow werewolf! Woroy grinned smugly at me as Fahn backed him up.

“See, even your men agree.”

“Please lecture him some more, Your Highness. Veight needs to learn his lesson.”

“Oh, I will.”

I never expected Fahn of all people to team up with Woroy. Annoyed, I hurriedly shooed Fahn out of the room.

“I’ll take care of Woroy, so you go join the squads searching for survivors. I want to rescue as many people as possible before sunset. If any of the surviving enemy soldiers are willing to surrender, rescue them too.”

“You want to save them too? I mean, if you say so...”

Fahn glanced back and forth between me and Woroy. *Just go already.* Once Fahn left the room I picked up Woroy’s dented armor and quickly changed the topic.

“By the way, Woroy. I’m surprised you had anti-Blast Cane armor.”

“Oh, that set was a prototype my dad had his mages make. The moment he saw the Blast Canes Eleora invented, he realized they’d soon become the main weapons used in war.”

“So that’s why he had this set of armor made.”

That old geezer really had a lot of foresight. I smiled ruefully at Woroy.

“But you probably can’t mass-produce something like this, can you?”

“Yeah. That single set of armor costs as much as a small castle. Even the Doneiks Family’s wealth wouldn’t be enough to buy more than a dozen sets. It’d be more efficient to pour our resources into something else.”

Armor, even enchanted armor, was effectively a consumable product. On top of that, it cost a lot to maintain. Even if Rolmund’s magical equipment industry was more advanced than other nations, it still wasn’t easy to make something like this. I replaced the ruined armor onto the shelf I’d took it from and looked Woroy in the eyes.

“Eleora just sent me a messenger saying her army’s surrounded Kinjarl Castle. This war is almost over.”

Woroy met my gaze for a few seconds, then looked down.

“I see... So we’ve lost.” Woroy sighed. “The moment the Bolshevik family betrayed us, our sphere of influence within North Rolmund was cut down by half. Meanwhile, you have all of East and West Rolmund on your side. We knew it’d be impossible to win if this war started dragging on.”

At present, the Eleora-Ashley alliance had four times the land and four times the population that Prince Ivan did. He probably knew by now that there was no way he could win. Which was why I had an alternate suggestion.

“Woroy, please ask your brother to surrender. The longer this war drags on, the more casualties there’ll be on both sides. Prince Ivan should know he can’t win.”

Of course, even if Prince Ivan did surrender, it’d be difficult to convince Prince Ashley to spare his life. Still, there was no point in all this needless bloodshed when the outcome was already certain. Technically the weaker Rolmund got, the better it was for Meraldia from a diplomatic standpoint, but I wasn’t cruel enough to wish suffering on the empire’s people. It was time this war was brought to an end. However, Woroy shook his head.

“I don’t mind telling him to surrender, but I know my brother won’t. His disease is eating away at him, and he doesn’t have long to live.”

“Is his illness really that serious?”

“Yeah. Even if he retired to focus on his health, he probably has no more than

ten years left at most. As it is, he'll probably die in another few years. His body's too weak to withstand magic or medicine, either." Woroy added, "And knowing my brother, he probably intends to bear the full responsibility of inciting this rebellion. After he's done everything in his power to steer Rolmund toward a better future, that is."

If he was that determined, then I had no choice but to let Eleora deal with Prince Ivan. However, there was one other thing I wanted to request of Woroy.

"In that case, can you at least tell your soldiers in Creech Castle to surrender?"

Woroy chuckled at that.

"I see. So my men actually managed to make it safely back?"

"Yeah, thanks to that stunt you pulled. If anything, this was a strategic victory for you. Though I guess your army can't make any moves without you to lead them."

Right now, Woroy's army only numbered a little over 10,000. It was even smaller than the army Eleora had taken north. His men lacked the numbers to return safely to Doneiks territory, let alone invade the capital. After weighing his options for a few seconds, Woroy nodded.

"I guess it's pointless to make them fight any longer. Alright, I'll tell them to surrender. But only if you treat them fairly."

"Of course."

Since I was keeping Woroy alive, I imagined most of his men would be willing to surrender to me. I was relieved to learn I wouldn't have to storm Creech Castle to take it anymore.

"According to Eleora's letter, the battle at Kinjarl Castle is becoming quite bloody. I'm glad we won't have to do the same here."

"Yeah..." Woroy's expression clouded over. I couldn't blame him. His brother was currently besieged by the enemy. After a few seconds of silence, he finally opened his mouth, "Lord Veight, I have a request."

"What is it?"

I had a feeling I knew what it was.

“I don’t care what happens to me, but please spare my nephew’s—Ryuunie’s—life.”

I knew it. As the ringleader of the rebellion, there was no doubt that Prince Ivan would have to be executed. But it was also likely his eldest son, Ryuunie, would be as well. Rolmund’s system of punishment was harsh enough that occasionally people who weren’t even related by blood to a serious criminal were executed, so there was no way Ashley would spare Prince Ivan’s son. However, Ryuunie was just a 12-year-old boy.

Woroy stared intently at me. He knew that as a prisoner of war, he had no real bargaining power. At best he could have tried to hold back asking his men to surrender and used that as leverage, but he hadn’t. Probably because he knew that wouldn’t amount to much of a bargaining chip.

His expression was twisted in anguish as he stared at me. I didn’t really want to make Woroy suffer, nor did I want to kill a literal child. I couldn’t imagine what it was like being surrounded by an enemy army at the tender age of 12. So I sighed and nodded.

“You owe me for this, Woroy.”

“You’ll really do it!? Thank you, Veight!”

Woroy’s expression brightened instantly. *Sheesh, what a simple-minded guy.*

“If the men in Creech Castle surrender, I’ll head straight for Kinjarl Castle. However I don’t know what the exact situation over there is, so I can’t promise I’ll be able to save Prince Ryuunie for sure.”

“Yeah, I know.” Woroy’s face fell a little, and he nodded. “Both my dad and my brother wanted to leave behind a better Rolmund for Ryuunie. Besides, he’s my cute little nephew. For my dad’s sake and for my brother’s, I want to do everything I can for him.”

I know what you mean. I’ll do what I can.

“I’m afraid all I can promise is that I’ll do my best. I can’t give you any guarantees, unfortunately.”

Woroy grinned mischievously.

“Saying you’ll do your best is all the guarantee I need. I can’t imagine anything’s impossible for you if you truly put your mind to it.”

Stop, you’re just putting more pressure on me. Scowling, I flung my cape back.

“Like I said, I can’t guarantee anything. Anyway, I’ll have you uphold your end of the bargain first. It’s time to ask your men to surrender, Woroy.”

“Let’s go then.”

—Veight’s Letter to Airia: 7—

Dear Airia,

I’ve started to grow sick of the sight of snow. Has any fallen in Ryunheit? Anyway, I imagine you’re dying for news, so I’ll keep the pleasantries brief. Somehow or another, I’ve managed to capture Prince Woroy. With this, his army should surrender to me. If everything goes well, I’ll be able to capture Creech Castle for Eleora without having to siege it.

As for how things ended up this way, Eleora managed to force Woroy on the back foot by convincing one of his primary supporters, Lord Bolshevik, to betray him. The Bolshevik family is the most influential family in North Rolmund after the Doneiks, and they’re related to the Doneiks family by marriage. Eleora only managed to get Lord Bolshevik to surrender because he was convinced North Rolmund’s defeat was imminent. From there, she just needed to offer good terms, and he betrayed his longtime allies, the Doneiks. That threw a wrench in Woroy’s plans and...well, I managed to capture him after a few minor incidents. I’m pretty sure I didn’t do anything too reckless this time. I mean it.

Normally Woroy would be executed for his crimes, but I really don’t want to see a guy like him die, so I’m hoping to find a way to spare his life. He’s too great a man to die here. Besides, he’s popular with the people. In fact, I’d say he’s more suited to being emperor than Eleora is. It’s possible he might end up

being a dangerous political rival, but I hear he and Eleora used to be close long ago. As I'm sure you're aware, Eleora's a kind woman at heart. If she also asks for Woroy to be executed, I'll have to give up on saving his life, but I'm almost certain she won't.

Incidentally, what does the council think of my decision? I know I've been granted full authority in all matters regarding Rolmund, but I'd still like to know if the other councilors agree with me or not. Woroy is someone with the right to inherit the throne. Even if we strip him of his title, the nobility of his birth won't change. Once Eleora becomes empress, it's possible Rolmund may become Meraldia's rival again. In which case, it might be a good idea to bring Woroy over to our side as a way to keep her in check. To be honest, this is an idea I only just came up with while writing this letter.

I realize I'm acting on my personal interests here, but I'll do my best to make sure my personal interests align with Meraldia's. So I hope you'll approve of me working toward saving Woroy's life. I know this is soft of me, but I'd prefer not to kill anyone outside of the battlefield.

After sending off that letter, I succeeded in getting the soldiers of Creech Castle to give up their weapons and surrender. Mostly because Woroy had asked them to, though. *Still, I'm sure Woroy's army knows they can't win anymore. I doubt they'll try anything violent.* I had the troops Eleora had left behind secure the castle once it was emptied. I decided to keep Woroy's army within the castle as prisoners as well. Without their weapons, they weren't a threat. Still, there were a lot of them. Keeping them all in the castle was going to be difficult, but I couldn't afford to let them return home just yet.

Some of them were overseers or free men as well, meaning I needed to treat them well. For a short while, I was inundated with administrative duties as I struggled to sort out the post-battle situation. To make matters worse, it seemed Prince Ashley's nobles wanted to interfere with my work.

"The nobles want to meet with me?" I asked Mao, who'd come to the castle

to deliver supplies. It had been a while since I'd last seen him. Mao checked the receipts he'd received for his wine delivery with the records in his checkbook and nodded to me.

"Yes. On the surface, they just want to officially congratulate you on your victory, but it's likely they actually want to build connections with you."

"Why would they bother making connections with me?"

As far as everyone in Rolmund knew, I was just one of Eleora's advisors. I didn't have any real authority of my own. Grimacing, Mao just shrugged his shoulders.

"The Doneiks rebellion has almost been put down, so they're probably panicking because they haven't contributed at all. Chances are, they want you to give them some menial duty like guarding the castle or watching over the prisoners."

"They want a pretext to say they fought at the front lines too, huh?"

They sure were shameless. While we'd been putting our lives on the line, they'd just been sitting cozily in their castles. Honestly, I didn't care if they took my credit, but it wouldn't be fair to my men to have their merit snatched out from under their noses, especially since quite a few of my mage corps had died in the battle yesterday.

"No way I'm giving them anything. The only people allowed to step foot inside Creech Castle are Eleora's troops and the mages Prince Ashley lent me."

Unlike the troops who'd been fighting continually up until now, the soldiers under the nobles' command would all be lax and inexperienced. There was no telling what they'd do for the sake of earning more merit, so I didn't want them anywhere near the castle.

"Besides, the whole reason I'm having my troops stay here is to protect Woroy's army from Ashley's. Right now those guys are more of a problem than our actual opponents."

If Ashley's reserve army made it here, chances were they'd execute the prisoners and torch the castle, just so they could say they "participated in the war." I despised wanton destruction like that, which was why I'd occupied the

castle myself as fast as I could. I wouldn't be able to face Woroy if I let any of his men get executed.

Mao smiled at me and said, "In that case, I imagine you won't allow them to march north with you either when you go to join Princess Eleora?"

"Of course not. No way they're coming along."

They'd bring nothing but trouble. Since they wouldn't technically be under my command, I wouldn't be able to stop them from looting nearby villages. And there was no doubt they'd do just that.

"Mao, find some way to stall the army behind me. We can't openly antagonize them, but I really don't want to meet with any of those nobles."

"I knew you'd say that. Fortunately, I've started making preparations for this situation."

Mao seemed oddly pleased by my request. I showed him the most recent letter Eleora had sent me.

"Eleora's almost finished conquering Kinjarl Castle. She's managed to develop a new magical tool to locate the underground aquifers the castle draws its water from, and block off their wells."

She'd sent a sample along with her letter. It looked like a small blue jewel attached to a chain. She'd christened the jewel she'd shaped out of magic the "Dowsing Gem." I offered the jewel to Mao, and he nodded appreciatively.

"Ahhh, so this is what she did with the jewels I ordered for her. It was quite difficult to procure the amount she wanted without anyone noticing."

"You really can get anyone anything, huh."

"I simply happen to have some familiarity with the ore trade since it's so intricately linked with the salt trade. I also managed to make some connections with the mining guild here when I first arrived."

Mao dangled the jewel from its chain and watched it sway. Back on earth, I'd seen people use similar methods to read fortunes. Apparently Eleora had made her mages use these to sniff out all the water reserves Kinjarl Castle used. Once she'd found them, she'd had her engineers block off the streams that supplied

the aquifers, causing them to quickly run out. As a result, Kinjarl Castle currently had no means of procuring water outside of gathering snow.

“Kite can do something similar, but it’d probably take him years to find where all a castle’s wells led by himself.”

“Indeed, it would be difficult to replicate such a feat with Meraldia’s technology.”

Only Rolmund had the technology and the population needed to mass-produce tools like these on a practical scale. It was why the mage corps had been so successful here. Meanwhile, Meraldia just relied on a few highly talented mages to run its most vital systems. I needed to change how Meraldia treated magic, else we’d find ourselves falling behind technologically. Just as I was thinking that, Kite walked into the room with a tired look on his face. There was a stack of papers in his hands.

“I’ve finished inspecting everything. There’s nothing unusual to report.”

“Good work.”

While Kite’s epoch magic was extremely useful, the problem was there was no one who could take over his job if he was tired or needed a break.

“Kite, take the rest of the day off. I’ll have Parker and my werewolves take care of things from here. Go have some tea and relax.”

“You sure?”

I didn’t want to run the demon army like a Japanese company, after all. Mao, Kite, and I all shared a cup of roasted tea and discussed the new tool Eleora had developed. Kite took the jewel into his hands and stared intently at it.

“You know, this doesn’t actually react to water located underground. It searches for hollow cavities underground.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Mao suddenly looked very interested.

“True Dowsing Gems that find water aren’t very accurate and often give false positives. However, an enchanted stone that only reacts to empty cavities is much easier to make and far more accurate.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, though there’s not always a guarantee that a hollow underground cave has water in it. Still, this means Eleora’s version is a lot more versatile.”

Kite nodded back at me.

“Yeah. Back when I worked for the Senate I had to explore a lot of underground caverns. Plenty of shady businesses use them to hide their assets to avoid having to pay taxes on their earnings.”

Mao frowned. It seemed he was using exactly that method himself. Seeing Mao’s discomfort, Kite grinned and added, “You don’t have to use this just for looking for hollow cavities in mines or underground, either. You could use it to find hidden passages or secret staircases too.”

Mao’s frown grew deeper. *You have those, too? That’s actually kinda cool.* Since I wasn’t a tax collector, I didn’t have to worry about who was squirreling away funds where. There were more interesting uses for this tool on my mind.

“Doesn’t that mean you can use it to find secret passages leading in and out of castles?”

“Yeah, you probably could.”

Alright, we’re definitely making some of our own back in Meraldia.

“In that case, I should ask Eleora for a report on what she found with these. We might learn something important about Kinjarl Castle.”

While Eleora had been looking for aquifers, she must have stumbled across one or two empty caverns not containing water. She’d probably assumed they were water stores that had dried up, but it was possible they’d actually been secret passages.

“Oh yeah, Kite. You and Lacy don’t have to come to North Rolmund if you don’t want to. If you stay here I’ll have a trusted point of contact in Creech Castle too. Besides, you two have earned a break.”

“But I...”

I placed a hand on Kite’s shoulder and smiled at him.

“Fighting in foreign territory has left you more exhausted than you realize. Don’t push yourself too hard.”

Kite and Lacy weren’t soldiers. Seeing so much violence had probably put a larger emotional burden on them than they realized. Lacy might have experienced a few battles when she’d been pretending to be a saint, but not anywhere humans fought humans. Reluctantly, Kite nodded.

“Fine... I’ll admit I have been feeling a little under the weather recently. Sorry for worrying you, Veight.”

“Nah, this is my fault. I’ve been relying on you guys too much. I shouldn’t have brought you to the battlefield, no matter how useful you are.”

“But Veight, if we don’t come, won’t you be short-staffed? You won’t have any humans from Meraldia with you.”

I gave Kite a reassuring smile.

“What are you talking about. I’ve got one right here. Isn’t that right, Mao?”

“You want me to come!?”

Mao grimaced, but I pretended not to notice his reluctance.

“You’re used to seeing the horrors of war, aren’t you?”

“Actually, I dislike the sight of bloodshed...” Mao started to protest, but when he saw the expression on Kite’s face he trailed off with a sigh. “That being said, I suppose I’m more used to war than Kite. I agree that you shouldn’t bring him with you.”

No matter how well-behaved Eleora’s army was, the fact that they were at war meant we’d end up witnessing at least a few atrocities at Kinjarl. Furthermore, she didn’t have total authority over Prince Ashley’s troops that had gone with her. There was no telling what they’d gotten up to these past few weeks. It was entirely possible they’d started raping and pillaging. I definitely didn’t want Kite or Lacy to have to see such horrors. I patted Mao’s shoulder and grinned at him.

“Then it’s settled. I’ll be counting on you, my fellow scoundrel.”

Mao gave me an annoyed look, then turned away.

“Well...if you insist. I’ll assist you to the best of my meager ability.”

Good. It’ll be a relief to have you around. I quickly sorted out the situation in Creech Castle, then left for the north with Mao, my werewolves, and the two hundred cavalry Eleora had loaned me.

—Airia’s Reply: 5—

Dear Veight,

I discussed your plans for Prince Woroy with the council. While we do not know what kind of person he is, we’re all in agreement that if you wish to save him, he’s someone worthy of our trust. Though a few of the councilors have misgivings about sparing someone who’s politically opposed to Lady Eleora, we have all decided to leave things to your judgment. Do as your heart dictates. We believe that no matter what you choose, you will still bring peace to Meraldia.

Personally speaking, I believe you are making the right choice, Veight. After all, it is only thanks to that “softness” of yours that I’m still alive today. I will never forget the panicked look on your face as you, a werewolf, hurriedly tried to stop me from foolishly taking my own life. I sincerely believe it is your kindness that will bring peace to this turbulent continent.

That aside, I’m deeply relieved to hear that you’ve won your battles and are no longer in any danger. All that remains now is for Lady Eleora to win her own battle at Kinjarl Castle. That castle is the Doneiks family’s stronghold, correct? I pray the castle falls swiftly, and that this civil war comes to an end. Both for Rolmund’s sake, and for yours.

The northern edges of Rolmund looked exactly how I’d expected them to. While the villages and towns we passed were intact, many of the castles and

forts on our route showed signs of recent fighting. Furthermore, a few stray buildings and fields had been razed. There were also large mounds where the dead had no doubt been recently buried. Parts of nearby forests had also been chopped down for emergency timber, and many bridges had been destroyed. It was hard to tell which army had done what.

“The damage doesn’t look as bad as I expected,” Mao muttered as he surveyed his surroundings. He seemed somewhat relieved. I nodded in agreement, and added, “Of course not all of the horrors of war are easily visible. I just hope Eleora’s army didn’t steal from or harm the villagers.”

Mao gazed intently at me, an odd smile on his face.

“You’re a strange man, you know that?”

“What makes you say that?”

“We’re in the middle of enemy territory. In my experience, soldiers tend to be happy when they see their enemy’s lands laid to waste.”

I guess I’m not a soldier at heart. Shrugging, I replied, “I’m not interested in wars between humans. I’m a werewolf, after all.”

“Is that how it is?”

“That’s how it is.”

I hope I managed to fool him.

Eleora left behind multiple small garrisons to ensure the safety of the towns and castles she’d conquered. It was thanks to them that we were able to reach Kinjarl Castle without fear of being assaulted on the way. The principal castle of the Doneiks family stood at the peak of a particularly precipitous mountain. All of the nearby towns were part of the Doneiks’ domain, but Eleora had long since subjugated them. After learning that Eleora was stationed at the front lines, Mao and I waded into her camp to look for her.

“It’s been a while, Lord Veight.”

The weeks of fierce fighting had turned Eleora into a hardened veteran. Her imposing demeanor created a stark contrast with her striking looks.

“I see you’ve become even more of a warrior in our short time apart, Eleora.”

I felt kind of bad for taking it easy at the rear now. However, Eleora just smiled ruefully and said, “Who do you think I have to thank for that? You’ve been racking up so many exemplary achievements in the rear that I’ve needed to become more bold just to avoid losing face.”

Really? While we were talking, the younger nobles supporting Eleora started gathering around us. The shining suits of armor they’d departed in were now covered in scrapes and dents. They looked like real soldiers now, instead of children playing pretend.

“Lord Veight, it’s been far too long!”

“Congratulations on capturing Prince Woroy!”

“We’ve been protecting Her Highness Princess Eleora with all our might!”

Everyone looks so experienced now. War brought out facets of people that would otherwise never come to the fore. Among Eleora’s supporters, there were nobles who’d defeated enemy generals in single combat, nobles who’d toppled fortresses with just their squad of personal soldiers, and nobles who’d single-handedly convinced supporters of the Doneiks family to change loyalties. Yet others had shown they were exceptionally proficient in the more mundane tasks of running an army, such as managing supply lines or governing conquered territory. All of these nobles would make for good candidates for important posts in Eleora’s new government.

“I see you’re all serving Princess Eleora well. It’s because of your efforts that I can rest easy.”

Everyone gave me dubious looks. *No really, I’ve been taking it easy. The only reason I could focus on Prince Woroy was because I was confident Eleora’s army wouldn’t mess up.*

“Oi, Lekomya...”

“Yeah, I know. We got ahead of ourselves.”

“Petty achievements like these aren’t nearly enough to satisfy Lord Veight.”

“We should have strove even harder.”

Things are going well guys, you don't need to force yourselves. Eleora cleared her throat to get everyone's attention, then said, "It seems your bad habit has reared its head again, Lord Veight?"

"What bad habit?"

Eleora took a few steps toward me and replied with a frown, "Your bad habit of downplaying your achievements and abilities. In fact, it seems to me like it's gotten worse."

I felt like that couldn't be the case, but if both Woroy and Eleora were saying it, there might be a kernel of truth to their words. In retrospect, the old Demon Lord used to say that to me all the time too.

"Well...I guess I can't deny it, if that's what everyone says."

"Then why not admit it? You should be proud of your achievements for once."

Hmm... I'd only gotten this far thanks to the knowledge I'd inherited from my previous life, as well as my skills as a werewolf. Not only that, I'd been blessed with an exceptional magic teacher, and both my superiors and my subordinates were all highly competent. Given all of these advantages, anyone could accomplish what I had. None of these momentous achievements were due to my own merit. *Yeah, I don't really see what I should be proud of.* Seeing my expression, Eleora sighed.

"It seems to me that you have your own standards by which you judge yourself. And that those standards are incredibly high."

"You...might be right there."

Eleora nodded to me, then dismissed her nobles.

"We will be holding a war council soon. Be sure that you've completed the tasks assigned to you by then."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Once we were alone, Eleora sighed and offered me a chair.

"I know more about you than most people here, which is why I have to ask. Are you hiding something from me?"

I gave a little start. *She's sharp.* Eleora placed two teacups in front of us, then peered into my eyes.

"You were born deep in the forest and protected your village from monsters multiple times. Later, you started learning magic and joined the demon army, after which you conquered Ryunheit. Correct?"

"Yeah."

Man, that takes me back.

"From there you convinced the city to join the demon army, and eventually brought all of southern Meraldia onto your side. I tried to rally the north to subjugate your new nation, but you defeated me, took me prisoner, and unified Meraldia."

"That's right."

Most of that happened just recently, but it felt like the events of a decade ago. Eleora sighed again.

"Meaning you've won more battles in the span of a year than most generals do in a lifetime. Normally, people with your level of success would let it get to their head. And even if they didn't, they'd at least be proud of what they'd achieved."

Thinking back on it, it really was a miracle that everything worked out as well as it did. Granted, most of that was thanks to other people and not me. Before I could dwell on the past any longer, Eleora leaned close and asked, "So why is it that you keep insisting that none of these achievements are your own?"

"Please stop reading my mind."

Yeah, she's really sharp. More importantly, she never backed down.

"This excessive humility of yours is something that could only have been beaten into you by someone else. But from what I know of your past, that's never happened. Something's not adding up here."

Damn, she's one step away from figuring out I've been reincarnated. Back in my old life I... Actually, nevermind. I don't wanna remember it. Sweating profusely, I answered, "I don't wish to lie to you Eleora, so please don't ask any

more probing questions.”

I could probably come up with some half-assed lie, but I doubted it’d get past Eleora anyway. Eleora gave me a sad smile and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“No, I’m the one who should apologize.”

There was no harm in telling Eleora the truth, but it would be difficult to get her to believe me. But more importantly, I just didn’t want to recall my past. Eleora silently pushed one teacup toward me. It was tea she’d brewed herself.

“Thank you,” I said with a slight nod.

I took a small sip as memories I tried not to think about whirled around my head. Noticing my glum expression, Eleora said, “You’re someone who only looks forward. Someone who has no interest in past glories and victories. The only thing on your mind is what you need to accomplish next. I’ll pretend that’s all there is to it.”

“Thank you...”

To be honest, this wasn’t really the time for painful reminiscences anyway. We were in the middle of a war.

“Incidentally, Eleora, I’d like to talk to you about what I want to accomplish next. I’d like to save Prince Ryuunie’s life.”

Eleora sighed again.

“The moment I heard you were coming, I figured that would be the case. Even if you do, it’ll be difficult to convince Ashley to spare him.”

“I know. But that was Woroy’s condition for cooperating with me. I suppose there are no downsides to breaking my word, but for the sake of my own conscience, as well as your honor, I’d like to keep my promise.”

Knowing what I did of Rolmund, as well as Earth’s own history, there was no precedent for sparing the life of a rebel’s son. However Prince Ryuunie wasn’t guilty of anything, nor was he responsible for stopping his father’s plots. It was simply unfair that he’d have to die for Prince Ivan’s crimes. I gulped down my tea and gave Eleora a wicked grin.

“If we manage to keep him alive, we’ll be able to plunge Rolmund into even further chaos. Don’t forget, that’s the real reason I’m here.”

With this, I had a perfect excuse to want to save Prince Ryuunie. I just had to play the part of the villainous advisor, manipulating the hapless princess into bringing further strife to the empire. *I’m pretty good at acting like a bad guy, if I do say so myself.* But despite my explanation, Eleora smiled.

“You really never change, do you?”

Wait, what?

“You’re always like this... Though I suppose that’s why I can trust you.”

Seriously, what are you talking about? Eleora traced the rim of her teacup with her finger and added, “If you’re serious about this, then it’s not like I can stop you anyway. So as your sworn ally, I may as well support you. I’ll gather all of the legal experts from the Originia family that I brought with me. Once you’ve saved him, I’ll argue his case for you.”

“Thank you. I’m in your debt, Eleora.”

Within Rolmund, everyone believed Eleora was my boss. So it would be a huge help to have her backing my plan. I got to my feet and said, “Once this battle is over, our battle with Prince Ashley’s faction will begin. Bringing the remnants of the Doneiks family onto our side will help us down the line.”

Though I said that, I wasn’t at all sure they’d actually be any help. If anything, they were potential sources of rebellion. Still, I’d do my best to make sure they served Eleora’s cause. I had a responsibility to Eleora, to Woroy, and to Meraldia to make sure they did. To be honest, I was drowning under so much responsibility that I really didn’t have time to be reminiscing about my past life.

The Doneiks family’s final fortress, the impregnable Kinjarl Castle, was on fire. And I was inside it.

“Impossible...Lord Veight!?”

Prince Ivan was staring at me in shock. In the short time I hadn’t seen him, he’d grown quite haggard. It seemed his health really was suffering. Though

even if he hadn't been sick, his days were still numbered.

"It has been quite some time, Prince Ivan."

I bowed to Prince Ivan, electing not to draw my sword out of its scabbard.

"Ngh..."

Prince Ivan glanced around him, but his followers were nowhere to be seen. They had all surrendered or been killed. Turning his gaze back to me, the prince asked, "Lord Veight, how did you get in here?"

"Through your secret passage, Your Highness."

Using Eleora's new Dowsing Gems, we'd examined every single hollow cavity around Kinjarl Castle. After an exhaustive search, we'd finally discovered the underground passage we were searching for. Unfortunately, the passage was a baffling labyrinth. Not only had the hidden path been rife with traps, but it had even been protected by magical golems, a rare contraption. Had it not been for the enhanced strength and heightened senses my werewolf form gave me, I wouldn't have been able to navigate it safely. Prince Ivan sighed.

"To think you even managed to discover the castle's secret passage. Not only that, you were able to find your way through it alone. You've bested me, Lord Veight."

"Oh, you flatter me."

If I wanted to kill Prince Ivan, I could do it in two seconds if I transformed. But I hadn't come here to assassinate him. Hell, he'd probably keel over in a few days without me having to do anything. I walked over to the commander of the opposing army and stood at his side. Without a word, I turned to the open window. Numerous flags fluttered in the courtyard down below. Most of them bore Eleora's crest. Over the course of this ferocious northern campaign, the majority of Prince Ashley's army had switched sides and sworn allegiance to Eleora instead. It made sense, considering Eleora's army had a much higher survival rate.

"What a view, Lord Veight."

"What a view indeed. And the only people here to see it are you and me."

I smiled, and Prince Ivan smiled weakly back at me.

“True... But why haven’t you killed me?”

My expression became serious, and I turned to meet Prince Ivan’s gaze.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you. Why were you in such a hurry to start this rebellion?”

“Surely you’ve realized by now. I don’t have much time left. And among Rolmund’s royalty, I’m the only one who understands the crisis this empire faces. This rebellion was my only chance at steering the empire away from a course of ruin.”

Humans had a bad habit of ignoring crises until those crises were staring them in the face. Especially when those crises concerned their own futures. Ivan’s smile grew sad.

“I believed I had the troops necessary to take the crown by force. But I misjudged the Originia family’s and Eleora’s...no, your strength, Lord Veight. I never imagined you would be able to turn the tables so handily.”

Prince Ivan walked away from the window and fell into his sofa. His breathing was unsteady. He waved for me to join him, so I also sat down.

“You were planning on using blitzkrieg tactics to overwhelm Prince Ashley’s army before he could drag the war out and use his superior resources to grind you down through attrition, right? I just made sure the war did drag out.”

It was only because I’d dragged things on that Woroy had been pressured into challenging me to a one-on-one duel, resulting in his total surrender. The flames surrounding the castle had grown stronger, and wisps of smoke started coming into the room from the open window. There was enough that even a human’s nose could pick up on the burning scent. But despite the imminent danger, the two of us continued conversing calmly. Sighing, Prince Ivan brought a hand up to his forehead.

“My brother died because of how gravely I misjudged your strength. I suppose it’s at least some consolation that he fell at the hands of a famous general such as you.”

It appeared Prince Ivan didn't know I'd taken his brother prisoner. Smiling, I shook my head.

"Fear not. Woroy is still alive."

"Truly!?"

Prince Ivan looked up at me in shock, and I grinned at him.

"Indeed. He is formally under my protection as a guest."

"Why would you do something so dangerous as to keep him alive?"

"Because he can be useful to me. I have a policy of not killing people with value."

If Rolmund was just going to kill him, then I'd let him work for me in Meraldia. Rolmund's nobles could complain all they wanted; I wasn't Rolmundian and so didn't have to follow their laws. Which was why I could make this promise to Prince Ivan with confidence.

"I swear on my honor as a Meraldian councilor that I, Veight Gerun Friedensrichter, will keep Woroy safe."

"Oh..."

Tears formed in the corners of Prince Ivan's eyes. He must have been really worried about his brother. This seemed like a good opportunity to bring up the reason I was here.

"I am also planning on saving the life of Prince Ryuunie, your son. Where is he?"

Prince Ivan gave me a sad smile.

"Moments ago, I sent him out of the castle together with Ser Barnack via an escape route. Of course, I'm certain pursuers will reach him before long. But even though I knew it was pointless, I still wanted to extend his life for as long as possible."

I must have just missed him then. If only I hadn't gotten lost at that one part...

"Fear not. I will rescue Prince Ryuunie. Even if it means opposing Princess Eleora."

Surprised, Prince Ivan scrutinized my expression.

“I’m grateful you’d go so far for my son, but why? Unlike my brother, he has no value to you.”

He had a point. I decided to answer honestly.

“It’s true that he will be of no use to me in the current war. And even in the battles to come, he will be nothing but a burden.”

The Doneiks were already ruined, and Ryuunie wouldn’t help me take down Prince Ashley at all.

“However, he will become a potent trump card much later in the future. That’s all there is to it.”

Having Ryuunie under my protection after this series of civil wars was over would give me a huge political advantage. *Probably, anyway...* Prince Ivan narrowed his eyes, trying to discern the veracity of my words from my expression.

“I see. But is that really all? I may be on death’s door, but I am no fool, Astral Fencer.”

He truly was the heir to the Doneiks line. His acumen was not to be underestimated. *Fine, I guess I can tell you.*

“Well, seeing as you’re not long for this world, I suppose I can at least give you some peace of mind by telling you the truth.” Grinning, I said plainly, “I dislike seeing children die.”

Still scrutinizing my expression, Prince Ivan asked in a confused voice, “That’s the only reason?”

“It is.”

Prince Ivan sighed.

“It’s strange. Thinking about it logically, that answer should be a lie, yet it doesn’t feel like you’re lying to me.”

That’s because I’m not. Those are my true feelings. So long as I drew breath, I refused to let any children die under my watch. Prince Ivan got to his feet.

“Thank you for being honest with me. Wait here a moment, Lord Veight. Don’t worry, I won’t run.”

I nodded to the prince, and he vanished into an adjoining room. In less than a minute, he returned. Held in his hands was an ornamental wooden knight. It had been made using the famous wooden parquetry of North Rolmund. The knight resembled a knight piece in Shougo. Though the decorative figure was clearly old, it had been crafted with exquisite skill. Prince Ivan smiled at me.

“As the last in a line of schemers, I feel as though it’s only fitting to attempt one last scheme before I face my end.”

“You think you can outwit me?”

“That’s right.”

Now things are getting interesting. Prince Ivan offered the wooden knight to me.

“Please deliver this to Ryuunie. You can examine it with magic all you want, but I’ll just tell you this now, you won’t find anything. Only my son understands what this is and what it means. If you manage to deliver this safely to him, its contents will be of great use to you.”

My curiosity was piqued. I took the knight and smiled mischievously at the prince.

“Alright, I’ll take it. Is this your way of ensuring I don’t change my mind?”

“Not at all, Lord Veight.”

Prince Ivan shook his head, his smile surprisingly sincere.

“I am simply entrusting all of my burdens to you. Nothing more, nothing less.”

The heck’s that supposed to mean? Before I could ask, Prince Ivan said, “Now then, I suppose it’s time I went to apologize to my wife and father. Will you be the one to take my head? You’ll earn a lot of merit for it.”

I shook my head.

“I’m not interested in merit. I will not disgrace you.”

Nodding, Prince Ivan reached for the doorknob. His back turned to me, he

said, “I’m glad I met you. Farewell.”

With that, he opened the door and disappeared into the room within. A few seconds later, the smell of blood permeated through the air. I turned toward the wooden door and bowed. Then I looked down at the wooden knight in my hands. It seemed my responsibilities had multiplied once again. *Ah well. That’s life.*

—The Sword Saint and the Werewolf—

As I matched my pace with Master Ryuunie’s, I glanced backwards. The trees were quiet and laden with snow. Noticing the shift in my expression, Master Ryuunie turned worriedly toward me.

“Uncle, what’s wrong?”

Dodging the question would only worry the young master more. And so, I told him the truth.

“There’s five men chasing after us.”

“Are they pursuers sent by Eleora?”

Though Master Ryuunie tried to put on a brave face, his lips trembled. His fear was understandable. At the tender age of 12, he’d lost his entire family, and his only remaining vassal was this old swordsman. And now he was being pursued. Though it wouldn’t have been surprising if the despair and terror had caused him to freeze up, he continued trudging resolutely onward. *Thank the heavens His Highness Prince Woroy taught Master Ryuunie the basics of marching.*

As gently as possible, I said to the young prince, “I don’t know who they work for. But judging by how cautious they are, they’re likely hunters and not soldiers. Chances are, they’re assassins.”

“O-Okay.”

I unclasped my cloak and prepared to fight.

“Cover your face with your hood and assume the snow fox stance that I taught you. Whatever you do, don’t look up until I give the word.”

“O-Okay.”

Master Ryuunie lay down face-first in the snow and curled up into a ball. Thanks to his white cape, he was hard to spot in the snow. And since he was hiding under the shadow of a nearby tree, it was unlikely that any stray arrows or errant sword swings would reach him. Drawing my sword, I retreated to the safety of the same tree Master Ryuunie was hiding next to.

Before long, our pursuers came into view. As I’d surmised, they numbered only five. All of them were equipped for traveling in snow. Their boots were studded to prevent them from slipping as well. These assailants were experienced. Still, I was confident I could thin their numbers. I unbuckled my sheath from my sword belt and took a sling out of my pocket, which I fastened to the sheath. It was a simple sling, made of string and leather, but it became exponentially more powerful when attached to a long object like a sheath. I loaded a few sharpened rocks into the sling and flicked my sheath forward.

“Gah!?”

The head of one of the assassins’ split open, and flecks of blood spotted the snow as he fell to the ground. If my skills hadn’t deteriorated, those rocks should have driven right into his brain. There were only four opponents left now. All of them were equipped with crossbows, but I didn’t intend to give them time to load them. Realizing that they’d just be run down if they attempted to use their ranged weapons, the assassins charged at me.

“Hmph!”

I cut down the first of them, then tackled his corpse to use his back as a shield. The wall of flesh blocked the second attacker’s swing, and I cut him down as well. However, the remaining two assailants were quite skilled.

“Haaah!”

“Hiyaaaah!”

They struck simultaneously, one aiming for my neck while the other went for my lower back. There was no way for me to block both strokes at once. But there was no need for me to block. I leapt backwards to avoid both slashes, then pivoted and slashed at one of the remaining assassins. But I hadn't closed the distance between us as well as I thought, and he nimbly dodged out of the way. Once again, the two assailants struck at me from opposite sides at the same time. The longer this fight dragged on, the less chance I had of winning, old and slow as I was. I pulled a throwing knife out of my coat pocket and flung it at one of the attackers.

"Whoa!?"

The assassin bent backwards and deflected the knife with his sword. But the knife served its purpose of momentarily occupying his attention. While he was stalled, I turned to the other opponent and stabbed them through the throat.

"Damn you!"

Cursing, the final remaining opponent charged at me. I deftly parried his swing and lopped his wrist off. The enchanted sword I'd received from Lord Doneiks, Man-Eater, was capable of slicing through armor like a hot knife through butter.

"Ga—"

Before he could even finish his scream, I swung upwards and cut his head off. Though my muscles had atrophied with age, the special properties of my enchanted sword made it easy to cut through things. After confirming that all of my opponents were indeed dead, I finally let myself relax.

"Master Ryuunie, it's safe now."

The young prince timidly looked up, then gasped when he saw the corpses lying in the snow.

"Are they all dead?"

"They are. I killed them."

Master Ryuunie examined the corpses for a few seconds, then sucked in a deep breath and turned to me.

“Thank you, Uncle. Y-You saved me.”

He truly was a strong prince. I didn't think he'd have the mental fortitude to thank me after seeing corpses for the first time.

“What's important is that you're safe, Master Ryuunie. Come, we must hurry.”

My hometown, the tiny northern village of Petka, wasn't far from our current location. But as I examined my surroundings, I realized we weren't out of danger yet.

“Master Ryuunie, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to be patient a while longer. It seems more pursuers are headed this way.”

The five that had come after us initially had been mere scouts. Disposable pawns used to gauge our reaction. And while they'd been keeping me busy, we'd been completely surrounded by 20 new opponents. Things didn't look good.

With how much stamina I had left, I'd be able to fight at most three or four more opponents. Even when I'd been in my prime, I wouldn't have been able to take on 20 at once. But it didn't matter how low my chances of victory were. My duty was to cut them all down. I drew my sword, and the young prince once again lay down in the snow. He learned quickly.

I needed to protect Master Ryuunie, for both Lord Doneiks' and Prince Ivan's sakes. I was the only thing standing in the way of the complete extinction of the Doneiks line. It was an honor to be the final line of defense for the future of the Doneiks family. Anyone who believed otherwise was not a true knight.

I steadied my breathing. We were standing at the summit of a small hill. Our opponents would have to scale that hill, which would both exhaust them, and make it difficult for them to all keep the same pace. Thanks to the dense undergrowth, it was impossible for them to fire arrows at us either. As expected, the enemy's ranks quickly dissolved as the assassins ascended at different speeds.

“Raaaaah!”

With a fierce battle cry, I cut horizontally at the first assailant to reach us.

Since the first to reach us was the fastest of the lot, it was imperative that I cut him down or we'd be unable to escape. From there I cut, thrust, and bashed my way through all the enemies that made it up the slope.

Naturally, I sustained injuries in the fighting as well. Occasionally enemies would get past my guard and slice at my torso, only to be rebuffed by the chainmail I was wearing under my hood. Trusting in the enchanted armor to protect me, I focused wholly on offense. But as time passed, exhaustion began to set in, and my breathing grew labored. My swings grew duller.

Our opponents were used to fighting in terrain like this, and they continued maintaining the encirclement even as they closed in on us. As dangerous as it was to remain, I had no choice but to stay and fight in order to protect Master Ryuunie.

"Ngh!"

One of my opponents thrust with all his might, and I guarded a moment too late. My chainmail was unable to blunt the blow, and the attacker's sword pierced my left shoulder.

"Hrmph!"

I sliced open the man's head, but it took more force than before to do so. The magic within my blade was wearing off. As I pulled the dead man's sword out of my shoulder, a fountain of blood spurted out. If I didn't stop the bleeding soon, I'd lose too much strength to continue fighting.

Though my spirit still burned fiercely, my body was old and wounded. There were still around a dozen opponents remaining. This battle was just getting started. *Don't fail me now, you accursed old body.* Though I had no regrets about dying in battle, there was someone I needed to protect.

While I was desperately trying to formulate a strategy to escape this situation, a huge shockwave rippled through the air. It was sound. A veritable hammer of sound. The shockwave sent the remaining enemies flying. *Was that a wolf's howl?* The blast of sound felt more like an explosion of fighting spirit than anything. I had heard stories of how true masters of the martial arts were able to defeat enemies with their fighting spirit alone. Of course, piecing together what had happened wasn't important right now. This was my only chance at

victory.

“HRAAAAAAAAAAH!”

I fought with wild abandon, thrusting my sword into the neck of a dazed enemy. I then swiveled and split the head of another foe with a downward stroke. I needed to kill as many enemies as possible while they were still disoriented. But as I looked up from my second kill, I realized all of the enemies had been eliminated. They’d been killed in unbelievably gruesome ways as well. Some had their hearts ripped out of their chests, while others had their heads smashed to a pulp, or their limbs ripped off. Not even a grizzly bear could do this much damage to a human body this fast.

Could this mysterious ally have truly killed over ten men in the time it had taken me to kill two? It took me only a moment to discover who had perpetrated this slaughter.

Impossible. That’s a werewolf, isn’t it? I thought they were extinct in the north? Am I hallucinating? The black-furred werewolf was covered in dark blood. He slowly turned to me, the snow around him dyed a deep crimson. *If only I had the werewolf slayer... No, even then I wouldn’t be able to win.* No matter how hard they trained, no human would be able to defeat this werewolf. It would be like trying to defeat an avalanche with just a sword. That was how great the difference in strength was between us.

The werewolf sauntered over to me. Though the way he walked seemed haphazard, he left no openings for me to strike. It was as if a moving fortress was bearing down upon me. I raised my sword in one hand, prepared to go down fighting. However, the werewolf was too fast for me. He closed the distance between us before I could even react, then reached one clawed hand out toward me. Though his movements weren’t so fast that I couldn’t follow them, I was still unable to react.

The werewolf touched my left shoulder, and a second later the bleeding and pain stopped. *Wait, is he using magic to heal me? This werewolf knows how to use magic!?* None of the old tales I’d heard had mentioned a werewolf capable of using magic. Once he was done, the werewolf stepped back, showing no

signs of hostility.

“Did you...save me?”

The question felt foolish the moment the words left my lips, but the werewolf nodded. It then turned around and pointed to a village at the base of the mountain. It was not the village I had intended to go to, but looking at it, I spotted something flying above the small cottages. Meraldia’s flag. I hadn’t heard about Meraldia’s army coming here, but that was undoubtedly their flag.

“What’s the Meraldian army doing here!?”

The werewolf didn’t answer. He simply pointed at the flag. *Is he saying he belongs to the Meraldian army? Don’t tell me that demon regiment I’d heard rumors about really exists!?*

“Wait, are you...”

I turned back to the werewolf, but he was already gone. He’d somehow managed to vanish without making a sound. The whole scene had been so unbelievable I was half-convinced it had been a dream. But no, this was reality.

As I was still absorbing the shock, Master Ryuunie called out to me.

“H-Hey, Uncle... Can I look up yet?”

I returned to my senses and looked around. All of the assassins were dead.

“Yes. It’s safe, Master Ryuunie.”

The young prince instantly raised his head. After examining his surroundings, he looked up at me in shock.

“What happened!? Did you do this, Uncle?”

“No, this wasn’t my handiwork. It seems we’ve been saved by a werewolf.”

“A werewolf!? You mean like the ones they talk about in fairy tales!?”

“I can hardly believe it myself, but I saw him with my own two eyes.”

Of course, no one would believe me if I told them. In fact, I could hardly believe it myself. But now wasn’t the time to contemplate what had happened.

“Master Ryuunie, let’s head to the village at the foot of that mountain. It

appears the Meraldian army is over there.”

“Isn’t the Meraldian army our enemy?”

“I no longer know. However...”

If that werewolf wanted to kill us, he could have. There was no need for him to set a trap. Furthermore, if Prince Ashley’s army had reached my hometown, I wouldn’t be able to protect Ryuunie from them. On the other hand, Meraldia’s army was led by that famous Astral Fencer. He seemed like someone who could be reasoned with. *What if the werewolf who saved us was actually... No, that can’t be.* Either way, Lord Veight didn’t follow Rolmund’s laws. He was a kind man, and right now he was the only person I could hope to entrust Master Ryuunie to.

“Meraldia’s army is led by Lord Veight. I’m sure someone as kind as him will take your side, Master Ryuunie.”

“Y-You’re right.”

I had no proof that Lord Veight would rescue us, but right now I had no choice but to rely on him. The young prince smiled in an attempt to hide his unease.

“I like Lord Veight. I’m sure he won’t hurt us. So let’s go to him, Uncle.”

Smiling, I bowed my head to the brave prince.

“As you wish, my lord.”

I quickly fixed up my appearance, then went out to greet Prince Ryuunie—who’d come to surrender—with a nonchalant expression.

“Your Highness, Ser Barnack. You made the right choice to come to the Meraldian army’s camp. Feel free to rest and recover.”

The two of them were sitting inside the village’s town hall, which I’d converted into a temporary headquarters for our army. I offered both of them steaming mugs of tea. Though he still looked a little nervous, Prince Ryuunie smiled with relief at the warm reception. When I saw that smile, I felt like all the

effort it had taken to keep him alive had been worth it. And man, had it taken a lot to save his life. After discovering that a separate unit had been dispatched specifically to pursue Prince Ryuunie, I'd needed to find out who'd sent that unit. Since the technology of this world had barely advanced past the medieval era, I had no way of knowing what my allies were up to. After some investigating I'd discovered it wasn't Eleora's army that had sent that unit, meaning I was free to kill them all. Once I'd learned that, I chased after Prince Ryuunie. When I'd seen Ser Barnack struggling, I realized the only way I could save him in time was by transforming. And so I had.

Bringing my thoughts back to the present, I turned to the old knight and said, "Right now, Princess Eleora's army is only deployed in the fields around Kinjarl Castle. However, it's obvious that the group who attacked you were no ordinary bandits. Do you have any idea who they might have been, Ser Barnack?"

"They were trained assassins, that much I know. As for who sent them, your guess is as good as mine."

Ser Barnack kept his reply brief, but he seemed to be telling the truth. He added, "The Doneiks family has many enemies. Any number of noble families could have been behind the assassination attempt. Guessing which one would be difficult."

"I see."

Ser Barnack was neither a politician nor a general. He was just a swordmaster. All he knew about politics was the bare minimum he needed to do his job. I decided to let him and Prince Ryuunie rest for a bit before discussing anything else with them. While I was confident this town would remain safe so long as my werewolves were here to defend it, I still wanted to return to Eleora's main force as soon as possible. However, there were a few things I needed to take care of before I could.

"Parker, my sworn brother." Sighing, I bowed my head to Parker. "I'm sorry for asking this of you, but I need your help."

I knew for a fact that relying on him this much would just give him an inflated ego. But to my surprise, Parker didn't gloat at all.

"Since Kite's gone, it falls to me to do the investigating, correct? I'll handle it."

I really was blessed to have such a perceptive friend.

Necromancers were the mages most suited to war. Soldiers died in droves on the battlefield, leaving plenty of material for necromancers to work with. Today, I had my werewolves covertly carry the assassins' corpses over to a deserted section of the nearby forest. Once they were gathered, Parker and I stared down at the pile of bodies.

"They've got nothing on them that'd hint at where they're from, or who they are. Hell, they weren't even carrying wallets."

Parker nodded at my explanation.

"Then I suppose you do need me after all," he said. "The recently departed are like the babies of the underworld. Bending their spirits to my will won't be difficult. However, before I revive them, there's two things I need you to promise me, Veight."

The skeleton necromancer brought his face inches from mine. His expression was dead serious.

"First, I want you to trust my judgment and my methods. I'm the specialist here."

"You got it."

"That's all."

Wait, what about the second thing? Just as I was about to ask, Parker added, "The second thing is related to the first. The dead are not like the living. You cannot afford them the same sympathy, Veight. I know you're too kind for your own good, but kindness will only backfire here."

"A-Alright."

So he did have two conditions after all. He just did that lame joke to help me relax.

"Don't worry, Parker. I know that's the main reason I wasn't able to become a necromancer. I'm aware of my shortcomings."

Parker scrutinized my expression for a few seconds, then nodded.

“Personally I quite like that side of you, so I wouldn’t call it a shortcoming. But it’s certainly true you’re not suited to be a necromancer.”

You didn’t have to add that last bit.

“Very well. Now that that’s out of the way, I can begin.”

Parker thrust a bony finger out in front of him and started motioning a complex symbol in the air. By crafting a rhythm that appealed to the spirits of the dead, he was drawing them to him.

“My voice is a silent thunder that reverberates across the underworld. My eyes are empty sockets that pierce through the veil of darkness with radiant light. Answer my call, spirits of the dead.”

Parker sure is serious today. It had been a long time since I’d last seen him chant an incantation when performing necromancy. Spirits that had just died often retained the personalities and memories of their previous life, meaning people who’d been hostile to you in life would also be hostile to you as a spirit. The reason Parker was using an incantation was because he wanted to be doubly sure his control over the spirits was perfect.

Soon enough, translucent ghosts began to rise above the bodies. As they’d just died, their spirits still retained human form. Though there were over twenty corpses, Parker had only summoned a few spirits. No one was completely sure where spirits went after death, but all necromancers knew that calling forth specific ones was difficult. Parker curled his bony fingers into a fist and said coldly, “Kneel before me.”

The moment those words left his mouth, the spirits fell to the ground as if they were being pressured by some invisible force. Waves of mana thick enough to be palpable pulsed from Parker. It seemed he was going straight to using force. His voice still as cold as ice, Parker added, “Your souls are in my grasp. Newly born spirits, heed my command.”

The spirits writhed in pain as Parker’s overwhelming wave of mana pushed down on them. He bound them to this plane using necromancy, preventing them from escaping. He seemed completely unfazed by their silent cries of pain.

“Tell me what your last thoughts were as you died. Your master demands it.”

A faint smile played about Parker’s lips. The fact that he was enjoying this spectacle was kinda scary. Parker beckoned to me, and I walked closer to him. As I did so, I could suddenly hear the voices of the dead. As they had no vocal cords, they could only speak by vibrating the mana around them at varying frequencies. I perked my ears and deciphered the vibrations.

“Ryuunie... Ryuunie... Prince... Prince...”

“Barnack... Sword Saint... Barnack...”

“Capture... Capture... Kill...”

Parker shook his head and said coolly, “The lord of the dead requires more information than that. Now speak!”

Parker shook his fist, and the spirits danced like marionettes on strings. To the spirits of the dead, skilled necromancers were both absolute monarchs and merciless torturers. Once caught within a necromancer’s spell, they were helpless to resist.

“Doneiks... Kinjarl Castle...”

“Petoka...”

Parker raised his fist like a tyrant and swung it down through the air.

“Stop withholding information! Spit out what you know, or perish!”

The spirits crumpled to the ground. Though it looked like a horrifying sight, the rules for the dead were different from the rules for the living. And necromancers were well-versed in the rules for the dead. Which was why I knew it wasn’t my place to butt in.

“B-Bol...she...”

“Bol...she...”

“vik...”

Bolshevik? You mean that noble family that’s related to the Doneiks by marriage? The second most influential family in North Rolmund? The same family that surrendered to Eleora, which was the deciding factor in bringing this

rebellion to an end? Before I could stop myself I asked, “How’re the Bolsheviks related to this? Are you assassins sent by the Bolshevik family?”

But the spirits said nothing, and Parker shook his head.

“I can’t get any more out of them. This is as far down their memories as I can go, and I won’t be able to bind them for much longer.”

Parker waved his hand horizontally with a flourish. The spirits dissipated, like chunks of mist being blown away by the wind. All of them had mentioned Bolshevik. It was obvious the Bolshevik family was involved in this plot somehow. From the beginning, I thought it suspicious that the Bolshevik family, which had served the Doneiks for generations, had surrendered so easily. Now, it was clear I needed to investigate further.

But first, I needed to look after Parker. He was standing still, his empty eye sockets covered by dark shadows. Had I not known what he’d just been through, I would have been terrified by the expression on his face. I lightly patted my fellow disciple on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Parker. You did well.”

After a brief pause, he nodded.

“O-Oh...yes. I-It was nothing.”

He spoke in an awkward stutter. After losing his flesh, Parker had gradually begun to forget what it felt like to be alive. That slow lapse had of course been accelerated by all the time he spent peering into the world of the dead. Parker himself had been terrified of completely losing himself to the ghastly realm, so I’d done my best to make sure he didn’t have to use necromancy too much. But I asked him to help me with my investigation by using necromancy, and now it was my fault he was looking so despondent.

Now then, how should I cheer him up? I guess there’s only one good way. I sucked in a deep breath, then said tentatively, “You really helped me out back there. You’re a true friend and a true brother, Parker.”

Parker’s skull swiveled to face me.

“Wait, what did you just call me?”

“A true brother...”

Please stop making me repeat myself. It's embarrassing. Parker's expression suddenly brightened, and all of his bones began to shiver.

“What's with the sudden change of heart? No matter how much I begged you to, you never called me your brother before. Actually, don't bother answering. Regardless of the reason, the fact is, you've finally admitted it!”

It feels like it's been a long time since he last annoyed me.

“You finally recognize me as your brother! Feel free to rely on me for anything else you need. That's my job as your big brother, after all! Oh, and there's no need to stop at just *true* brother. Why not call me ‘O exalted brother from on high?’”

Seeing how carried away Parker was getting, I regretted giving him even this much.

“Well it looks like you've cheered up,” I said. “So that's enough coddling. Let's go back, Parker.”

“Wait! Please just call me brother dearest one more time! Just once more is fine!”

“I never called you ‘brother dearest!’”

“Oh yes, you said true brother, didn't you?”

I definitely screwed up. Still, if it got Parker to cheer up, it was worth it. Despite my griping, I knew I'd be lonely if he was gone. Just a little though. Like, a microscopic amount.

I finished burying the dead assassins, then took my troops and left the village. There was no reason to remain any longer than necessary. I sat across from Prince Ryuunie inside a carriage flying the colors of the Meraldian army, and guarded by a squad of werewolves. In an attempt to cheer the depressed prince up, I said in as bright a voice as I could muster, “I don't know what the people of Rolmund will think of him, but if you ask me, your father was an amazing man.”

“Thank you, Lord Veight.”

Considering Prince Ivan had started a rebellion and then lost, both his allies and his enemies probably didn't think too highly of him. Worse, because of the crimes of his father, Prince Ryuunie wouldn't be accepted by Rolmundian high society either. In fact, most nobles probably wanted him dead. He was in a very precarious position. But despite how hopeless his situation was, Prince Ryuunie resolutely met my gaze.

"Why did you choose to protect me, Lord Veight? Grandfather always taught me to be wary of people who show kindness without asking for anything in return. Because there's always something they want from you."

Prince Ryuunie had a point. It was wise to be wary of people you didn't know. I debated how best to answer. Prince Ryuunie was technically an adult, according to the laws of Rolmund. Meaning he was owed an honest answer.

"Lord Doneiks taught you well. There are three reasons why I saved you, Your Highness." Prince Ryuunie looked nervously up at me and I continued, "First, because Prince Woroy asked me to rescue you as one of his conditions for cooperating with me."

"Uncle did!? Wait, does that mean he..." Ryuunie blinked in surprise, looking for a moment like the child he was.

"Fear not, Prince Woroy is alive. I'm sheltering him, just like I am you."

"Truly!?"

Prince Ryuunie smiled happily, momentarily forgetting how dire his situation was. It was only natural though. After all, now he knew at least one of his relatives was still alive. Guessing what was likely going through his mind, I added, "Woroy has a lot of influence not just over the Doneiks army, but also over the other nobles and citizens of North Rolmund. He will prove a valuable ally, especially because of how honorable he is."

Ryuunie mulled over my words for a few seconds, then looked timidly up at me.

"So you wanted to put Uncle...in your debt?"

"That's right." I smiled at the prince. "The second reason I saved you is this."

I brought out the wooden knight statue that Prince Ivan had given me.

“Ah, that’s...”

Ryuunie’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I was able to meet Prince Ivan in secret before Kinjarl Castle fell. The prince told me that if I passed this on to you, it would be of great benefit to me.”

As I said that, I suddenly realized it would fall to me to tell the young prince of his father’s death.

“After entrusting this to me, your father passed away. I’m sorry, it was beyond my ability to save him.”

I’m really sorry, Ryuunie. I didn’t mean to get your hopes up. As expected, Ryuunie fell silent, his expression twisting in anguish. Even if I could save everyone else, there was no way I’d be able to rescue the instigator of this rebellion. Prince Ivan had no choice but to bear the responsibility for what he’d wrought.

“Ryuunie, your father was someone worthy of respect. Regardless of what the rest of Rolmund says, Prince Ivan was a man with wisdom and foresight. He took his responsibility as a leader seriously, and fought with bravery.”

Though history would only remember him as such thousands of years down the line, if ever. There was no doubt that he would be painted as a villain for the next few decades, though. Ryuunie looked down sadly, absorbing my words. He probably hadn’t expected me to praise his dad. A few seconds later, his shoulders started to tremble as he desperately tried to hold back his sobs.

“I-I’m sorry... I-I know it’s unseemly for...a man of the Doneiks family to...to shed tears in public, but... F-Father... He...”

Tears dripped from his cheeks, staining his pants. Though I felt sorry for him, I had no idea how to console a prince. All I could do was look away and say, “Don’t worry. I’m looking outside the window right now, so I bear witness to nothing.”

Even though no one would have thought less of Ryuunie for crying his heart out, he nevertheless cried as silently as possible. As I stared out at the snowy

landscape, I thought back to Prince Ivan. If nothing else, his son loved and respected him. I had no idea if he'd been a good commander of men, but I did know he'd been a good father. I'd be happy if I could become even half the man Prince Ivan had been.

Sensing that Prince Ryuunie had finally finished crying, I turned away from the window. I then handed him the wooden knight.

"Here you go, Ryuunie."

"Thank you very much." Rubbing his puffy red eyes, Ryuunie stared down at the knight I'd given him. "Umm, Lord Veight. This knight is a special knight that my grandfather...I mean Lord Doneiks made."

"Special how?"

"I'll show you. If you do this here, then..."

Ryuunie pushed a section of the wooden paneling on the pedestal the knight stood on. The section smoothly fell inward. Ryuunie then turned the knight upside down and pushed another section on the underside of the pedestal. Again, the wooden section smoothly fell inward. He kept going, pressing and pulling random points on the knight as if he was solving some mysterious 3D puzzle.

"And then... I think you do this next..."

Ryuunie kept at it for a good few minutes. I'd thought the wooden parquetry hadn't left any open space to hide something in, but once Ryuunie slid the last panel in place—a section of the knight's leg—the entire pedestal the knight was standing on came apart.

"Awawawawa!?" Ryuunie cried out in surprise.

Blocks of disassembled wood fell onto his knees. Among the falling pieces was a single metallic object. A silver earring, inlaid with multiple blue gemstones. Upon closer inspection, I realized the earring was shaped like a lily. The gemstones had been cut in the shape of flower petals, while the earring itself made up the stem.

“Father gave these earrings as a gift to Mother before they got married,” Ryuunie said, picking up the earring and staring at it. “He buried one of them with Mother when she died, and kept the other with him.”

So it's a memento... It seemed this little wooden knight was actually a secret safe. I'd seen similar objects back in my old life. The safe was disguised as the pedestal the knight stood on, making the whole thing look perfectly unassuming. Ryuunie scrutinized the earring in his hands.

“This earring was really important to Father, but he said it's not that valuable.”

Meaning the earring itself wasn't what Prince Ivan had been referring to when he said this knight would prove valuable to me.

“In that case, Ryuunie, this earring is likely some manner of clue. Can you tell me everything you know about it?”

Ryuunie nodded solemnly and started sifting through his memories.

“Umm...the earring is shaped like a Knight Lily, which was Mother's favorite flower.”

“A Knight Lily, you say? I haven't heard of that flower name before. We must not have them in Meraldia.”

“It's a red lily that often gets adopted into knights' crests here, which is why it's called the Knight Lily.”

If the Knight Lily's a red flower, how come blue gemstones have been used for the petals then? Though I was curious, I remained silent so as not to interrupt Ryuunie's story. Seeing as he was still a kid, it was important to show that I was taking him seriously.

“Father knew how much Mother treasured the flower, and when she died he put an entire bed of Knight Lilies around her grave.”

Maybe this is the hint Prince Ivan was alluding to.

“Where is your mother's grave?” I asked.

“There's a villa near Kinjarl Castle. Mother was buried there.”

Alright, looks like it's time for a grave visit. Considering how unlikely it was that Ryuunie would be allowed to remain in Rolmund, this might also end up being the last time he'd get to see his mother's grave.

Ryuunie continued telling me stories about his parents. None of them sounded especially significant, but they did bring my thoughts back to the late Prince Ivan. Ryuunie's stories often featured Lord Doneiks as well, and at some point he said, "I really liked this wooden knight, so Grandpa told me he'd make me something like it for my next birthday."

Ryuunie started reassembling the wooden knight.

"And even though Father was really busy once the war started, he always told me he'd find time to make one for me in Grandpa's place."

In an attempt to console Ryuunie, I forced a smile onto my face and said, "Well, it seems Prince Ivan and Lord Doneiks kept their promises after all."

"Yes. But I would have preferred to have them alive than have this knight..."

The pedestal fell apart again inside Ryuunie's small hands.

"Ah...I'm sorry..."

His expression fell as he looked at the wooden blocks that had fallen to the ground. I got off my seat, knelt down, and picked one of the pieces off the floor. I then offered it to Ryuunie.

"Here you go. This is important to you, isn't it?"

"Th-Thank you very much, Lord Veight."

I wasn't equipped to console a bereft young boy. I didn't know how. So instead, I smiled impishly and said, "Incidentally, I still haven't told you the third reason why I saved your life."

"Oh yes. I completely forgot."

Ryuunie nodded to me, and I said in a conspiratorial whisper, "Well you see... That third reason is a secret."

"Huh?"

Ryuunie blinked in surprise, and I winked at him.

“Don’t think you’ll always get all the answers, young prince. And don’t forget, I’m an evil foreigner who came here to use all of you.”

“Umm, I’m not sure that...”

Ryuunie stiffened, unsure of how to answer. I grabbed his hand and placed the wooden block I’d picked up into it.

“You should be as wary of me as you would be of stepping on thin ice. Remember, just as your grandfather and father were men of the Doneiks family, so too are you.”

“O-Okay! Hang on...”

If you instantly agree when someone who tells you to be wary of them, that means you’re not being wary of them. Smiling, I went back to my seat and looked out of the window. *Fathers, huh? ...I’m still carrying on your will, Demon Lord.*

I purposely took a few days to return to Kinjarl Castle, which Eleora now occupied. Had I returned sooner, Ryuunie would have had to see more of the horrors of war than necessary. I’d wanted to give him some time to calm down and sort out his feelings. Furthermore, if there were any other assassins after his life, I’d planned on luring them out somewhere deserted so I could dispose of them. But in the end, we saw no one suspicious.

While I’d managed to successfully rendezvous with Eleora, we’d have to part again soon enough. Officially, I was no more than a Meraldian diplomat who’d assisted Eleora’s faction during the rebellion. So long as I was the one looking after Ryuunie, everything was fine. But the moment Eleora met the prince in an official capacity, her station would force her to take action. Which was why I had Ryuunie guide me and my werewolves to the detached villa he spoke of without stopping to meet with Eleora.

The Doneiks family was so rich that they had multiple stately mansions dotting the land around their castle. As far as I could tell, the Doneiks treated mansions like rooms. Each one was dedicated to a single person or purpose. There was a villa that was the equivalent of a reception room, one which was the equivalent of a library, and so on.

“All of Meraldia’s viceroys were pretty rich, but these Doneiks guys are something else,” Fahn muttered, half in disbelief and half in exasperation. I turned back to her and replied, “If you own a bunch of huge mansions like this, you need to employ a ton of servants to take care of them all. Which actually helps make sure that all the people living around here have jobs.”

“Ah, I see.”

It was both the privilege and the duty of wealthy nobles to spend their wealth. According to Ryuunie, there was also one other reason that the Doneiks possessed so many villas.

“It’s easier to hide things and people when you have this many mansions to choose from,” he said. “If it looks like something you’re trying to hide is about to be found out, you can always move it to a different mansion. At least, that’s what Father said.”

“I see. That does make sense.”

Ryuunie tightly gripped the wooden knight I’d delivered to him and added, “My family made a lot of secret agreements with people, and it needed somewhere to hide all the documents proving those deals took place. Apparently a lot of the stuff they did had to be written down on paper, even though you normally don’t want to leave behind evidence of your deals.”

It sure must be tough...being born into a family of schemers like this one. It appeared the mansion we were heading to, the one Ryuunie and his parents called the Knight Lily Mansion, had been home to his mother’s parents. In other words, the Bolsheviks. This was where the Doneiks had conferred with their longtime allies. And supposedly, a lot of heirlooms and other articles important to the Bolsheviks were housed here. Ryuunie’s mother and grandmother had brought a lot of Bolshevik memorabilia with them when they’d married into the Doneiks family, and so Ryuunie came here often with his father and grandfather for their sakes.

He led us through a wide garden and we entered the massive stone mansion. The place we ended up in was an unassuming guest room. The room had plenty of doors leading out of it, but the young prince told us that they were all dummies to hide the important passage within this room.

“This is the only way to reach the secret room.”

As he said that, Ryuunie moved one of the paintings hanging next to the bookshelf. There was a clicking noise, and Ryuunie slid the bookshelf away to reveal a new, hidden room filled with bookshelves.

“Wow, that’s awesome!”

Monza stepped toward the tiny room, but Ryuunie hurriedly held out a hand to stop her.

“Ah, wait! This is just one of the steps you need to do. If you actually walk into that room the whole thing will reset, and you won’t be able to reach the real secret room.”

Isn’t that kinda overkill? How mistrusting are you guys? It seemed when you had as much money as the Doneiks, you could just spend it on whatever you wanted. The fake hidden room was packed to the brim with books, but apparently they were all dummies, or just regular novels. Nothing secret. The Doneiks really took their privacy seriously. It almost felt like concealment had become a goal unto itself for them, rather than a means to an end.

The real secret room turned out to be behind the cupboard of the guest room next to this one. *Seriously, you guys don’t have to be this suspicious of everyone.* The real secret room was relatively small, but three of its four walls were covered with shelves that reached up to the ceiling. All of them were stuffed with rolled-up scrolls, thick ledgers, and sealed envelopes. Ryuunie turned to me.

“This room houses a portion of the Doneiks family’s secrets.”

“This is just a portion!?” Fahn exclaimed, as she looked up at the shelves in amazement.

“Yes. All of the dealings we had with Mother’s side of the family, the Bolsheviks, are recorded here. There are other secret rooms too, but I haven’t been taught where all of them are yet.”

As he spoke, Ryuunie picked up one of the envelopes and handed it to me. I opened the envelope and took a look at the documents within. They appeared to be a report about a particular baron who opposed the Bolsheviks. Apparently

he made a big show of looking pious in public, but was a huge womanizer in reality. The report mentioned that the Bolsheviks had purchased a number of the female servants working for the baron in order to fabricate a scandal against him.

I started flipping through the rest of the documents, looking for anything interesting. It seemed the baron eventually ended up sullyng the virtue of some countess, and died dueling her husband, who was defending her honor. Incidentally, the countess' husband had brought four armored knights with him for said duel. The baron's rapier had been crushed by one of his opponents' maces, and he'd then been beaten to death. The "duel" had been more of a lynching.

However, that truth had been completely erased by the Doneiks, leaving the publicly recorded fabrication behind. The documents even bore the signature of the previous Lord Bolshevik. These fabricated documents were forged with such skill that they'd stand up to scrutiny in court.

"I'm guessing these documents are here to prove that the Bolshevik family owes the Doneiks family a debt for their assistance?"

"I wouldn't know," Ryunnie replied, cocking his head. "Father told me I wasn't allowed to read any of these. At least not until I got older."

Your dad made the right call. Most of the other documents detailed various military pacts the Doneiks had made with other houses, the marriage alliances that transpired, and what kind of bribes and money laundering went on where. None of these dealings were the least bit legal, of course. Furthermore, from the brief skimming I did, I learned that the Bolsheviks were attempting to sabotage the influence of the Sonnenlicht Order within their domain. I had no idea why, but it was clear that the Bolshevik family was on bad terms with the church.

Jerrick, who'd been examining the engineering that went into all the mechanisms that hid this room, suddenly asked, "Hey boss, are all these papers worth anything?"

I momentarily stopped stuffing documents into a wooden crate and looked up at him.

“If we have these, we’ll be able to read the Bolsheviks’ next move. We’ll know what they’re scheming, and what they’re afraid of. Ah, hand me some nails and a hammer please.”

“Here you go, boss.”

I finished packing the last of the documents into the box, then nailed the lid shut with the hammer.

“By betraying the Doneiks, the Bolshevik family managed to preserve their influence and power through this civil war. In fact, because of how much their betrayal contributed to Prince Ashley’s victory, they’ll have even more influence in court now.”

I had no doubt secret negotiations of that nature had been what ultimately convinced the Bolsheviks to defect. But that wasn’t good for us. Ideally, only Eleora would come out of this war in a stronger position than before.

“So what you’re saying is all those papers are a weapon to keep Lord Bolshevik in check?” Jerrick asked as he nodded in understanding.

“Exactly. Make sure to grab every last scrap. I don’t want to leave a single document behind.”

“You got it, boss.”

As Prince Ivan had claimed, that wooden knight turned out to be hiding a treasure trove. These documents would be extremely important in asserting our dominance over North Rolmund. Closing my eyes, I offered a silent prayer for the departed prince.

“Prince Ivan, you most certainly held up your end of the bargain.”

Though, I had a sneaking suspicion half of the reason Prince Ivan had done this was to get back at the Bolsheviks for betraying him. *Well, it doesn’t matter either way.* I looked up and smiled at Ryuunie, who was quietly watching us work.

“Ah, my apologies for ignoring you, Ryuunie.”

“U-Umm, Lord Veight. I lost to your army, and I’m barely even an adult. You don’t have to be so polite to me.”

“You’re saying the exact same things your uncle did. Well, I guess if you’d prefer I stay casual with you, I can.”

Ryuunie smiled and gave me a small nod. With how mature he was acting I’d unconsciously started treating him like an adult. But he was still a kid. Being too polite with him would probably just make him uncomfortable.

“Errr... in that case, Ryuunie.”

“Yes?”

“This might be the last time you’ll be able to visit this mansion.”

“You’re...right.”

Ryuunie fully understood the position he was in. I pointed to the stack of boxes next to the one I’d just packed.

“We’ve got some extra boxes left over. So why not pick out some mementos of your mother to bring with you?”

Ryuunie’s expression perked up.

“Can I!? Ah, in that case, can I borrow four boxes, four soldiers, and a secretary? I want to catalogue everything I’m taking!”

For a kid, he sure was organized. *I guess that’s a Doneiks upbringing for you.* I tasked a few of my werewolves to help him out, and Ryuunie happily bounded out of the room.

“This way!”

As I watched him vanish into the bowels of the mansion I called out to his retreating back, “Ryuunie! I’m sure you understand, but please keep your luggage to things that’ll fit in these crates!”

“Okaaaaaay!”

I had the feeling he’d try to cram in a piano or a chest of drawers or something if I didn’t warn him.

“Also once we’re done packing everything, we’ll be visiting your mother’s grave! I’ll be waiting for you at the Knight Lily field, so don’t take too long!”

“Okaaaaaaaaay! Ah, please put that box there! We’ll start with the second

floor! Follow me!”

Is he really gonna be alright...

I waited for Ryuunie by the flowerbed Prince Ivan had made for his wife’s grave. I wasn’t a horticulture expert, so I had no idea when lilies were supposed to bloom. Probably spring or summer. But right now we were in the dead of winter. So naturally, the lilies weren’t in bloom. As Ryuunie approached the flowerbed, he looked up at me with a despondent expression.

“I forgot, Knight Lilies only bloom in the early summer... Umm, should I get some other flowers?”

I smiled gently at the prince.

“No need. Knight Lilies are what your mother liked best, right?”

“Huh? Y-Yeah.”

I knelt in the field of flowers and used my specialty: strengthening magic. More specifically, I boosted one of the flowers’ life force.

“Even if it is the dead of winter, I’m sure your love for your mother will...see, it bloomed after all.”

As I talked, the flower sprouted a bud which grew and bloomed in the span of a few seconds. A single red flower stood out among the field of hibernating plants.

“Wooooooooooooow!” Ryuunie’s eyes went as wide as saucers. “Th-That’s amazing! I don’t believe it! How’d you do that!? ...Err, how did you do that, Lord Veight?”

It’s fine, you don’t have to use my title or anything. I smirked to myself as I watched Ryuunie blush with embarrassment at his social faux-pas. With an exaggerated flourish, I waved my hand at him and said in a purposely arrogant tone, “The truth is, I’m actually an evil wizard. I came all this way from Meraldia to kidnap you.”

The first half of that was the truth, and the second half was starting to look like it’d end up becoming the truth, so I wasn’t *really* lying. I plucked the

blooming flower and handed it to Ryuunie.

“Here you go, Ryuunie.”

“Thank you very much, Lord Veight!” Ryuunie’s smile was sincere. After he finished placing the flower on his mother’s grave, he turned back to me and asked, “Was that really magic, Veight!?”

“Yeah, it was. I’m not as skilled as Eleora, but I do know how to use a bit of magic. Mostly I can strengthen people’s muscles and skin and bones. I can use that magic on plants and animals, too.”

I’d cast strengthening magic on plants a lot back when I started my training. Casting magic on myself was pretty simple, since I’d been able to notice the slight changes inside my own body, but casting it on others had proven challenging. Figuring out how to regulate the amount of mana I used had been quite an ordeal. The first time I’d tried it on potatoes and pumpkins, I caused them to blow up, which got me scolded by Fahn and my mom. Even after I’d gotten some more experience, people complained that my enlarged vegetables didn’t have any taste, or that I’d multiplied just the leaves of a plant but not the fruit.

“I’m not capable of making all the flowers bloom at once, and I still mess up from time to time, since I’m not a plant specialist. So I’m afraid you’ll have to make do with just this one flower.”

“That’s more than enough... Thanks to you, I was able to give Mother a proper send-off.”

Ryuunie looked down sadly at his mother’s grave. He was clearly reluctant to leave. As the disciple of a necromancer who’d been reincarnated once already, I didn’t have much emotional attachment to graves. Of course, I realized my view on death was far from the norm. In an attempt to cheer Ryuunie up, I decided to talk to him about my own experiences.

“My mom’s still alive, but I lost my dad when I was still a baby. I don’t even know what he looked like. It’s not exactly the same thing, but I do kind of understand what you’re going through, Ryuunie.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Actually, the man I looked up to like a father died recently. Even though I managed to avenge him, killing his killer won’t bring him back.”

The old Demon Lord had been more than just my boss. He’d been my life mentor. Not only that, he was the only other reincarnator I’d met. I really wish he could have lived for longer than he had. *I can’t even complain to you about leaving me behind.*

“U-Umm, Veight? You look kind of...”

Realizing I must have let my emotions show on my face, I hurriedly put my smile back on.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. Sorry, I was just reminiscing a little.”

“O-Oh.”

Ryuunie looked worriedly up at me. *What kind of expression was I making?* In an attempt to change the topic I pointed to the earring in Ryuunie’s hands.

“By the way, how come that earring uses blue jewels? The Knight Lily’s a red flower, isn’t it?”

Surprised by the sudden change in topic, Ryuunie looked down at the earring. *Sorry I keep springing topic changes onto you.* Ryuunie searched through his memories for a few seconds, then replied, “Umm... Well, there’s this legend about the origins of the Knight Lily. Supposedly, the Knight Lily was originally a blue flower, but...”

Long ago, a young knight was betrayed by his comrades and slain on the battlefield. He was buried in a field of Knight Lilies, but for some reason, the flowers that bloomed atop his grave were red instead of blue. Fearing that he’d cast some curse from beyond the grave, his murderers asked around about the red flowers, causing rumor of their existence to spread. Eventually, those rumors reached the knight’s hometown, and from that point on, the Knight Lily began to be associated with regret and revenge.

“But when the knight’s lover learned about these rumors, she went to visit his grave.”

When she finally reached it, she plucked the red lilies on his grave and took them back home to cultivate in her garden. Under her tender care, the red flowers turned blue once more, and the blue Knight Lily came to be associated with mercy and love.

Blushing awkwardly, Ryuunie finished off his tale.

“That’s why Father always said that the blue Knight Lily is a sacred flower that protects the people you love.”

I was surprised a pragmatist like Prince Ivan had such a romantic side to him. It truly was a shame that he’d had to die. Ryuunie went on to explain that there’d been a bunch of hubbub when the Knight Lilies around here had all suddenly turned red 30 or so years ago. The superstitious people of North Rolmund had started to fear they’d been placed under some kind of curse.

Though of course, I doubted that was the real reason. In fact, there was something about Ryuunie’s story that stuck out to me. I felt like I’d heard about flowers whose colors changed when they bloomed atop graves back on earth. *What were they called again? Oh yeah, now I remember. Hydrangeas.* Hydrangea flowers turned blue when the plant grew in acidic soil. As most of Japan’s soil was acidic, the hydrangeas growing naturally on the island were all blue or bluish purple. But if someone wanted red hydrangeas, all they had to do was grow the flowers in alkaline soil. At some point, I’d read a mystery novel where that was a huge plot point. Corpses changed the acidity of the soil around them when they decomposed, and the detective in that novel figured out where a corpse had been buried by noting the one spot that had different-colored hydrangeas. Ryuunie’s story about the dead knight was pretty similar to that.

Furthermore, 30 years ago had been when Lord Doneiks had completed his huge irrigation project, which massively impacted the nearby rivers. It was likely the change in geography had caused a shift in the acidity of the soil as well. On top of that, there were some crops that were better suited to acidic soil than others. For example, rice did just fine even in Japan’s highly acidic soil. On the other hand, wheat crops could not. Barley especially was weak to acid. Considering Rolmund’s staple crop was wheat, the dip in production had been

caused by that. Though I couldn't say anything for certain yet, it was possible I'd just found a solution to the problem that had tortured Prince Ivan.

"Umm, Veight? Is something wrong?"

I crouched down and met Ryuunie's questioning gaze.

"Thanks to your story, Ryuunie, I've discovered something very important."

"Huh? Y-You did?"

"It's possible we may be able to solve the agricultural crisis your father was so worried about."

"I don't understand how my story helped with that, but do you really mean it!?"

"Yeah. You were a huge help. I need to go meet with Eleora right away."

Unfortunately, I didn't know the first thing about agricultural science. After consulting with Eleora, I'd have no choice but to leave the rest in the hands of a specialist. I ordered my werewolves to pluck a few Knight Lily samples to take back with us. We potted the flowers in soil taken from around the garden, so as not to contaminate the samples. *Looks like I'll have a nice souvenir to bring back to Eleora.*

After we left, I entrusted all the documents regarding the Bolshevik family to Mao.

"Please go over these documents and analyze and organize them for me. I need to know all the dirt on the Bolsheviks."

"Very well. I imagine a specialist like Kite would be able to go through these faster, but I suppose I'm a specialist of sorts too."

A specialist of shady backroom deals, yeah.

"Sorry for pushing this on you, but please get it done as soon as you can."

Thanks to her significant contributions during this civil war, Eleora's popularity throughout the empire rose dramatically. The common people saw her as a hero. However, she was too busy dealing with the post-war cleanup to enjoy

her newfound fame. Sighing, she stamped her seal onto another missive.

“I can’t believe you’re making me do all this work when I’m just a puppet following the script *you* laid out.”

“Come now. You’re underestimating yourself, Eleora.”

I retorted with the same phrase Eleora was so fond of using against me. *Hell yeah, that was a good comeback.* I skimmed over the document she’d just signed and added with a grin, “You’re capable of commanding an army of ten thousand with ease, and everything you do, you do efficiently.”

Her only flaw was that she was lacking in sociability. But after reconciling with her uncle, she’d been getting better at that too. Eleora’s army was disciplined, high in morale, and held in high regard even by the people of North Rolmund and the soldiers who’d surrendered. Unlike her invasion of Meraldia, everything was going well this time. It probably helped that it was easier for her to deal with fellow Rolmundians, especially since she was an imperial princess. Also, she’d learned much about human nature after the bitter defeat she’d suffered in Meraldia. Now she knew how to win people’s loyalty and trust.

“You’re a wise and courageous commander,” Eleora sighed. “Which is precisely why you’re fit for the throne.”

She twirled her pen around her fingers. I used to do the same back in cram school in Japan. Though I never knew pen spinning was an art that crossed worlds.

“Hearing that from you just feels wrong. Besides, Ashley and Woroy are both fit for the throne too. In fact, even Ivan would have been a good emperor.”

The real tragedy was that so many talented men and women had been born into the same generation. And that they’d all had wildly different policies.

“That reminds me, Lord Veight. What are you going to do with Woroy and Ryuunie?”

“Well, for now, I’ll keep them in my custody using my official capacity as a Meraldian diplomat to shield them.”

It would have been great if I could have claimed that they’d just gone into

exile, but unlike modernized countries back on Earth, Rolmund wouldn't let that slide. Besides, it was in Meraldia's best interests to make it public that they were under my protection. Eleora pulled open her desk drawer and said, "Incidentally, I've gathered all the best legalists of the Originia and Kastoniev families. I've also investigated past cases, old laws, and the various imperial edicts previous emperors decreed."

Both the Originia family to which Eleora belonged and the Kastoniev family that her uncle belonged to were reliable, trustworthy allies. Landowning nobles functionally ran their territory like modern-day companies, meaning they needed lawyers and legal experts to advise them. Most nobles kept a few theologians and lawyers on staff in case they got into legal disputes with other houses. And naturally, highly influential families like the Originia family or the Kastoniev family hired only the best. As always, Eleora had met my expectations and exceeded them.

"After conferring with them, they said that this would be our best course of action," Eleora said. She grabbed a bundle of documents from her drawer and put them on her desk. "Considering there's no reigning emperor and the rebellion has just been put down."

"Are you sure we can even do this?" I asked, picking up the documents and leafing through them.

Eleora snickered at the incredulous look on my face.

"Legally, there's no reason we can't. No matter what objections people raise, the law says we can. If they try to contest us, I'll get both families' lawyers to destroy them in court."

Well that hardly sounds peaceful...

"There's a reason they're called 'Guardians of the Law' and 'Knights of the Pen.' They use the law like a shield and their pens like spears. In fact, they're more battle-crazed than soldiers."

Sounds terrifying. Though her words inspired confidence, she added one quick warning, "Of course, Ashley's faction won't take this lying down. They hold the most influence in Rolmund, and they're convinced that won't ever change, so they probably believe they'll get their way."

“They’re going to be a real pain to deal with.”

“But you came all the way to Rolmund precisely to deal with them, didn’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

I gave her a wry smile. Prince Ashley himself was a good man, but the nobles who supported him were largely self-serving, greedy, and indolent.

“A good chunk of Prince Ashley’s nobles will become a thorn in your side once you become empress. We might as well identify and eliminate those nobles ahead of time.”

“Indeed. That’s something I want to get out of the way before you return home.” Eleora lowered her gaze for a second, but then looked back up at me. “It’s precisely because you’re not bound by Rolmund’s laws and traditions that you’re such a powerful ally. I’m counting on you, Lord Veight.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do everything I can to help you. It’s the least I can do considering how much you’ve done for me.”

I bowed my head in gratitude.

“Don’t mention it, Lord Veight. I, too, don’t want to see Woroy and Ryuunie die. Woroy’s like a brother to me, and Ryuunie is still just a child.” Eleora handed me a letter as she spoke. “From the looks of it, Ashley’s of the same mind as us. He, too, wants to spare their lives. Really, he’s too kind for his own good.”

“You’re hardly one to talk.”

It was Eleora’s kindness that had led her to suffer more than anyone else, and eventually caused her to shut her heart off from others. The rest of Prince Ashley’s letter confirmed what I’d suspected. Namely that his nobles were squabbling over who’d get what land. For now, Ashley was firmly maintaining the stance that those who hadn’t contributed at all to his cause deserved nothing. But because of that, many of his supporters were calling for all members of the Doneiks family and Bolshevik family to be slaughtered. They were hoping that by reducing the number of nobles left alive, Prince Ashley would be forced to give them something. The prince sure had it rough keeping

his supporters in line.

“By the way, Eleora, do you want to meet with Ryuunie?”

“I’m the woman who killed his father,” Eleora replied, her expression clouding over. “How can I possibly face him? Especially since I can’t apologize due to my position.”

She continued, “I feel like I can sympathize with the actions Lord Doneiks took, if only a little. My uncle must have had a hard time ruling too.”

In the hopes of raising Eleora’s spirits, I decided to bring up the discovery I’d made now.

“Sorry for suddenly changing the topic, but do Knight Lilies grow in East Rolmund too?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah they do. I quite like them. Their striking blue hue calms me.”

I knew it. I grinned. I placed one of the Knight Lilies I’d made bloom on the way here on her desk.

“Look at this. The Knight Lilies in North Rolmund are red. They used to be blue, but over the past thirty years they’ve all turned red.”

Surprised, Eleora picked up the flower. After staring at it for a few seconds, she turned to me.

“Well, that’s surprising.”

“Yeah, I was pretty shocked when I first discovered that as well. However, this Knight Lily is very similar to another flower I know.”

I told Eleora about hydrangeas, which changed color based on the acidity of the soil they were in. I also explained as much as I knew about crops being affected by soil acidity.

“My theory is that North Rolmund’s soil composition has changed over the years.”

“Hmmm... Could Lord Doneiks’ irrigation project have been the cause? The timing matches up.”

I’m surprised you figured that out right away.

“While I have no proof, I believe that’s the case as well. Soil’s composition is affected by water; rain, snow, and even rivers influence it.”

“I see. Hmm, this is quite fascinating. Thank you for bringing me this news.” Eleora bowed her head to me, then smiled ruefully. “It feels like every time you go off and vanish, you come back with miracles in your hands.”

“Isn’t it a bit early to be saying that? We still don’t have any proof.”

Eleora chewed over my words.

“True. Our first priority should be to gather scholars and experts and see what their opinions are. This might be a good opportunity to consolidate our agricultural systems and establish agriculture as a formal field of study, too.”

I should have known an academic would pick an approach like this. Granted, it was a good idea, so there was no reason to object. Besides, reforming the empire was Eleora’s job. I’d be leaving for home soon. I gave Eleora an encouraging smile and said, “If everything goes as planned, you might end up North Rolmund’s savior.”

Eleora returned my smile and replied, “Don’t you mean, *you’ll* be North Rolmund’s savior?”

“As far as the people of this empire are concerned, I’m nothing more than your vice-commander,” I said. “Meaning the credit belongs to you. Besides, you’re more fit for the role of a savior.”

If I was going to leave anyway, there was no point in letting me have the credit. Sighing, Eleora’s smile turned somewhat gentle.

“Alright, let’s give this a shot. Thanks to this revolutionary news, I might be able to stand toe-to-toe against Ashley even in the realm of agriculture, which is supposed to be his specialty.” She added, “Now then, let’s get Ryuunie’s case sorted out. Once this civil war officially comes to an end, Ashley’ll be crowned emperor, and I’ll lose my authority as a field commander.”

“Alright. In that case, I’ll formally transfer custody of Ryuunie to you for now. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can take him someplace safe.”

I got to my feet and sucked in a deep breath.

“Let’s start shaking things up, partner in crime.”

Eleora chuckled.

“I think you mean ‘Let’s start shaking things up *again*.’”

Why do you look like you’re enjoying this so much?

—Prince Ryuunie’s Departure—

I tried to keep my back as straight as I could in the cold breeze. Father always told me that, “A true man stays resolute even in the face of hardship.” Right now, I was surrounded by soldiers from Eleora’s army. I needed to keep it together, or else...

Eleora and I were meeting in the town square of a small, secluded village. Every time I saw her, Eleora seemed to have a pained expression on her face, and today was no exception.

“Ryuunie. I realize this is sudden, but your sentence has been decided. Are you ready to hear it?”

“Y-Yes.”

Yesterday, while I’d been resting in the Meraldian army’s camp, one of Eleora’s soldiers came and brought me here. Uncle Barnack hadn’t been allowed to come with me. And while all of Eleora’s soldiers had treated me with kindness, I was still worried. Veight wasn’t here. I really wanted to see him again, but I hadn’t been able to meet with him since we’d returned from my mother’s mansion. Had Veight deceived me after all? *But he’s not the kind of person to do that...* Regardless, I needed to remain dignified no matter what the sentence was. I met Eleora’s eyes and quietly waited for the verdict. She unfurled a long scroll and declared in a loud voice, “Using my authority as temporary wartime commander, I, Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund, hereby sentence Ryuunie Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund to exile for the crime of high treason.”

Exile, huh? I expected that sentence considering Eleora had brought me to this remote village. Still, the announcement came as a shock. At least if I'd been sentenced to beheading or death by poison, I wouldn't have had to suffer. But I had no idea how to take exile with good grace. Ignoring my shock, Eleora continued, "From this moment onwards, you are stripped of the protections Rolmund's laws afford, as well as the mercy of Sonnenlicht. Do you understand what this means?"

"Y-Yes."

My voice trembled. No one would come save me, and I was barred entry from any and all towns and cities. Even if someone killed me, they wouldn't be punished for it. On the other hand, anyone who tried to save me would receive a harsh sentence. When I died, no one would bury me or build a grave for me. I was lower than even a slave, who were still at least protected by Rolmund's laws. Father had told me all about how harsh a punishment exile was. But Eleora wasn't done talking yet.

"As the custom of stripping the exiled of all their clothes is nothing more than a custom, we will forego that punishment this time. Likewise, you will not be doused with cold water before being cast out."

Is this her way of showing mercy? I was a little relieved, since it seemed I'd be able to leave the town with my dignity as a prince intact. Plus, I wasn't good with the cold. Of course I was still scared, but as a man of the Doneiks family, I would leave with my head held high. Otherwise Father and Grandfather would be disappointed in me.

"Th-Th-Thank you for your kindness!"

Unfortunately, I couldn't stop myself from tripping over my words. I was still scared, after all.

Once she finished her proclamation, Eleora's expression softened.

"Do you have any last requests, Ryuunie?" she asked. "So long as it's not clemency, I'll grant any request within my power."

I'd like another coat, I think. But while that thought flitted through my mind, I

nevertheless asked for something more important.

“P-Please don’t punish my retainers or the people living on Doneiks lands! They had nothing to do with this!”

Father had taught me that no matter what happened, it was my duty to protect my people. A noble who couldn’t beg for mercy on behalf of his subjects was no noble at all. Eleora nodded.

“Very well. Your request has been granted. I hereby swear not to punish the vassals of the Doneiks family, or the serfs living on your lands.”

Thank goodness... With this, I’d fulfilled my duty. I bowed my head to Eleora.

“I-I’ll be taking my leave then.”

As solemnly as I could, I raised my head and walked away. Though I tried to maintain a dignified appearance, I was scared of the soldiers around me so I did my best not to look at them. If any of them wanted to kill me, they could do so right now and not worry about being judged. I held back my desire to break into a run and slowly passed under the gates of the small town.

A dark forest spread out in front of me. A tiny trail cut through it, but I had no idea where it led. I wanted to turn back, but I knew that I couldn’t. I had to look strong, resolute. *Still, where am I supposed to go now?*

Lord Veight might have been willing to help me, but I had no idea where he was. *Is he waiting at Creech Castle with Uncle Woroy? But that’s so far... What about Uncle Barnack? Where’d he go?* I had no money and no food. Worse, the sun was about to set. *What should I do...?*

Anxious, I nevertheless decided to put some distance between me and the town. I didn’t want to cry in front of other people. So I’d go somewhere I could be alone. Hesitantly, I took another step forward.

The moment I rounded a bend in the trail, I spotted a carriage waiting in the trees. It bore a familiar crest. Meraldia’s crest.

“Wha—!?” The moment I shouted, the carriage’s door opened and, as if by magic, Veight appeared. “Veight!?”

The kind man from Meraldia gave me a gentle smile and said, “My apologies for being so late. Woroy insisted on being here to greet you, and smuggling him through North Rolmund proved to be quite an ordeal. Your uncle is one stubborn man.”

“Uncle’s here!?”

“Yo, Ryuunie! Looks like you’re doing well!” Uncle Woroy called out as he stepped out of the carriage after Veight. I heard he’d been taken prisoner, but he was wearing a sword at his waist. In fact, he hardly looked like a prisoner at all.

“Uncle!” Without thinking, I ran up to Uncle and leapt into his arms. “Uncle! Uncle!”

“Come on, kid. You know men of the Doneiks family aren’t supposed to cry. You gotta keep it together or your old man’ll be disappointed in you.”

But you’re crying too! Also, can you not hug me so tight? It kind of hurts. Looking rather pleased with himself, Veight walked up to me and said, “For the time being, you can live at Creech Castle. Eleora already told me I can do whatever I want with it. Besides, that castle’s sturdy enough that I can protect you two from any threat.”

Lord Veight hadn’t been lying when he said he was a sorcerer. After all, only magic could have achieved something like this. Veight winked at me.

“Come, Prince Ryuunie,” said Veight with an exaggerated bow. “Join me, and together we will build a new future for the Doneiks family.”

“What do you mean?”

Uncle lifted me up onto his shoulders and answered for Veight, “Oh yeah! We’re gonna rebuild the Doneiks family in Meraldia! Don’t think we’re done for just yet! I’ll tell you all the details later!”



“Please don’t be so rough with your nephew, Woroy. We went through all this trouble to secure him unharmed, it would be a shame if he got injured now.”

Veight’s right, Uncle. The Meraldian general clapped his hands and ushered us into the carriage.

“Alright, get in, everyone. I want to be out of this forest and inside our encampment before the sun sets. Ser Barnack has lodgings prepared for us.”

Twenty horsemen rode up from the other side of the trail and arrayed themselves in a formation in front of the carriage. Veight turned to the horsemen and raised a fist.

“Rolmund’s laws mean nothing to us Meraldians. They can’t stop us from doing what we want! Isn’t that right, guys!?”

The horsemen smiled.

“Now that’s what I wanna hear, Veight!”

“Like hell we’ll let them kill a kid!”

“Welcome to the Meraldian army, Prince Ryuunie!”

I took Veight’s hand and let him escort me into the carriage along with Uncle. After I got settled into my seat, Veight smiled at me again.

“The truth is, Eleora and Ashley are quite worried about you as well. Both of them asked me to protect you, so you have nothing to fear.”

“Th-Thank you, Veight!”

Veight’s so mysterious, and cool, and amazing.

Since Eleora was responsible for suppressing the rebellion in North Rolmund, so long as a new emperor wasn’t crowned, she held absolute authority in the subjugated region. Her first order of business was to confiscate territory from all the Doneiks family supporters and redistribute it to her followers. Since most of her landless nobles wouldn’t be able to handle managing huge swathes of

territory, she started off by granting them all single villages. From here on out, they'd need to show results to work their way up the nobility ladder. Among the Doneiks family supporters who surrendered, nobles who showed promise were allowed to retain some of their territory. Those deemed incompetent were stripped of their lands, but their peerage remained the same. Doing this meant they got to retain their family names, leaving the door open for them to regain land sometime in the future.

Though Eleora had stripped them of their assets, she'd been considerate enough to leave them their honor at least. Partly because she didn't want them to start another rebellion in desperation. The authority to seize and grant land normally only belonged to the emperor. However, Prince Ashley had yet to take the throne. And according to Rolmundian law, when there was no official emperor, the commander of an army had full authority over the lands they'd conquered. That law was put into place because oftentimes, princes and nobles had needed to quickly write up new laws after suppressing a rebellion, and couldn't wait for a lengthy coronation ceremony to take place. Naturally, plenty of Prince Ashley's supporters were unhappy with this arrangement.

"Your Highness, you cannot just ignore Prince Ashley's authority like this!"

"Indeed, this is highly disrespectful!"

The moment we returned to the capital, we were bombarded by unhappy members of Prince Ashley's faction. Today we were entertaining Count something-or-other and Marquis such-and-such. We'd been receiving visitors every day now, so I'd long since forgotten their individual names.

Eleora, who was currently busy penning orders for Ser Lekomya and her other core supporters, glanced at me. *She wants me to take care of everything, doesn't she? Ah well, I guess I can.* I reluctantly stepped forward. Originally I'd been trying my best to blend in with the wall and look like a statue, but it seemed my plan had failed.

"I believe you are the ones being disrespectful here," I said.

I had no intention of granting any of these guys' demands, so I figured I may as well rile them up. I plopped down onto a nearby sofa and looked condescendingly up at the two nobles.

“Her Highness Eleora risked her life for Prince Ashley. Her *respect* for the prince is far greater than yours, considering you never even set foot on the battlefield. So hold your tongue.”

Let’s start with some light jabs. The nobles obviously wanted land, and their belief was that even if they hadn’t fought, it was Ashley’s faction who’d won, so they deserved something too. Of course, that was a misguided belief, but the nobles didn’t realize that.

“But Princess Eleora has exceeded her authority by deciding the traitors’ sentences and reallocating land without consulting anyone!” protested the noble.

Yeah, I knew you’d say that. Grinning, I grabbed a sheaf of documents titled “Wartime Law” from Eleora’s table and began to read off, ““In the event that a rebellion occurs during a time when there is no reigning emperor, the member of the imperial family with the highest claim to the throne active at the front lines has the authority to govern the subjugated territories as they see fit.’ That’s what’s written in Rolmund’s law books.”

“Wha—!?”

Huh, they actually didn’t know that? I guess I can’t be too surprised considering how esoteric this country’s laws are. The two nobles had surprisingly contrasting reactions.

“I-I cannot believe such a law—”

“Hold on a minute now. While Prince Ashley may have remained in the capital, the rebels’ goal was to capture it. So you could claim that it was part of the battlefield too. Meaning—”

I know I’m not one to talk, but this is one crappy argument. If I entertained Count whatever’s sophistry this would never end. I needed to put a stop to this now.

“Please read what the definition of a battlefield is, according to the law code,” I scoffed. “It’s laid out in very clear terms.”

“Ngh...”

The nobles exchanged glances, then fell silent. To be honest, I hadn't read through the law code myself, but Eleora's lawyers had told me that as long as I told people to check that definition, I'd be fine. However, it seemed these nobles were more persistent than the others.

"W-Well even if Princess Eleora was within her rights to do what she did, she still shouldn't have taken the matter of the Doneiks heirs into her own hands!"

"Those two are part of the traitor's family! They should be beheaded!"

God, you guys don't know when to give up. Fortunately, I was prepared for this too.

"The law I just mentioned specifies that Princess Eleora has every right to decide their fates as well," I countered. "Are you saying you take issue with her lawfully decided sentences?"

"Of course we—"

I didn't even let him finish.

"I see, so you're claiming that Princess Eleora's mistaken in her judgment?" I rose to my feet and placed a hand on the sword at my waist. "You doubt the same general who invaded Meraldia with only a hundred men, destroyed the Senate, and unified the region?"

Though technically, she wasn't the one who unified the region.

"Not only that, she was the one who cooperated with Prince Ashley to put down the rebellion while everyone else was sitting at home twiddling their thumbs. I would go so far as to say she is the greatest general Rolmund has."

This, at least, was the truth. Eleora had succeeded splendidly in her second campaign, and now she was Rolmund's savior. And since the people believed she'd won her first one as well, the citizenry thought her invincible. As a result, Eleora could do more or less whatever she wanted, and the few nobles who opposed her wouldn't be able to find the support to really censure her. But the ones who came to complain were too ignorant to realize this. Or perhaps they had realized it and just didn't want to admit it. Either way, they weren't very wise. Meaning it was up to me to show them their place. I gazed coldly down at the two nobles.

“Prince Ashley himself said that Princess Eleora’s judgment was sound. Forgive me for my ignorance, but I am a Meraldian after all. Are you two implying you have more authority than Prince Ashley?”

I took a step forward, and the nobles hurriedly stepped back. I kept my verbal grilling going.

“I will be taking Woroy and Ryuunie with me back to Meraldia as official guests of the state. There, they’ll live as proper Meraldian citizens.”

This was a lie. It was true that a new life was waiting for Woroy and Ryuunie once they reached Meraldia, but not as Meraldians. However, Prince Ashley’s nobles weren’t completely stupid. I knew that explanation wouldn’t be enough for them.

“But exile is meant to be a humiliating sentence that leads to death!” the noble protested. “And yet, you’re treating these exiles as honored guests! You can hardly say that the Doneiks have been appropriately punished!”

The noble was right. However, I was under no obligation to follow Rolmund’s laws.

“That’s not my problem,” I replied.

“What did you...”

The two nobles were speechless. I quickly fired back, “I simply provided shelter to two impoverished people. Having been exiled they’re no longer Rolmundians, so how I treat them has nothing to do with you, right?”

“Wha—!?”

Since exile had stripped them of their Rolmundian citizenship, Rolmund’s laws no longer applied to them...or so I’d been told. The Originia family and Kastoniev family lawyers were a force to be reckoned with. I’d hoped this little tidbit of legal knowledge that had been passed down to me would have cowed these nobles, but they still seemed adamant about arguing with me.

“You can’t just ignore the point of exile like this!”

“We’re done talking to a foreigner like you! Princess Eleora, please tell us what you have to say on this matter!”

God, will you ever give up? Eleora looked up from her paperwork and gave the two nobles a troubled smile.

“While Lord Veight is a sworn friend and a trusted ally, because he’s a foreigner, there are times where he refuses to see reason. Even I occasionally have a hard time dealing with him. So good luck dissuading him from his course of action.”

“Are you kidding me!?” the noble screamed.

Eleora was resorting to some petty tricks now. But both she and I had multiple meetings to attend after this. We really didn’t have time to bother with these small fries. I snapped my fingers. The door behind me swung open, and a team of officials walked into the room.

“Who are these people, Lord Veight!?”

“The lawyers of the Originia and Kastoniev families. If you have a problem with my interpretation of the law, take it up with them.”

I grinned at the nobles, and the lawyers all waved their robes of office at them. They took out their law books and prepared to crush any legal arguments the nobles might bring up. One of them looked the nobles in the eyes and said dryly, “Know that anything you say can and will be used against you.”

“How dare you be so rude!”

One of the lawyers took out a pen and scribbled something down.

“Your comments have been recorded.”

“Wha—!?”

“Feel free to continue.”

Prince Ashley’s nobles started to panic. They were up against an army of law masters. If they weren’t careful with what they said, Eleora would have legal grounds to sue them. At long last, the two nobles realized they had no hope of winning.

“P-Prince Ashley will hear of this!”

With that clichéd two-bit villain line, the nobles took their leave. *Sorry you*

have to deal with these guys, Ashley. But it's partly your fault for not keeping them in line. Once the nobles left, Eleora looked up from the orders she was writing and muttered, "Add those two to the watch list. I want you to dig up something we can use to strip them of their titles."

The lawyers all bowed to Eleora.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Eleora had formally marked those two as enemies. Right now, she had vast amounts of influence over North Rolmund. And she could use that influence to entice nobles and commoners alike into acting on her behalf. Stripping a lesser noble or two of their rights was well within her current ability.

"All I want is for you to strip them of their influence and power. Make sure you do everything legally. There's no need to resort to assassination."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The lawyers bowed again, then exited from the room to accomplish Eleora's will. When just the two of us were left, I smiled knowingly at Eleora.

"You're quite the kind princess."

"I don't have it in me to be as cold as Lord Doneiks. If I tried to emulate him, I'd just end up bringing ruin to myself."

Eleora sealed the letter she'd been writing in an envelope, then got up and stretched.

"Oh yes, I was sent some spiced sausages as a gift. Why don't we eat them now, Lord Veight?"

"Sounds good to me. Should I invite the werewolves standing guard outside too?"

"Hm? Oh...sure. I suppose I don't mind."

Eleora made a strange face. It was customary among werewolves to share whatever food you had, so if I scarfed those sausages down in secret the others would get mad at me for it.

—Airia's Reply: 6—

Dear Veight,

After your last letter, I heard you were embroiled in multiple battles, so I refrained from replying until things settled down. Firstly, I would like to thank you for sending me constant reports during such a busy time. I have read through all of your letters multiple times. Now that you've returned to Schwerin, I no longer worry that sending you replies will distract you from your mission.

You'll be pleased to know that the Commonwealth Council voted unanimously to adopt your proposal for Prince Ryuunie. Shatina in particular supported it very enthusiastically. I suspect she saw her own situation reflected in the prince's. I cannot imagine how painful it must be to lose your parents to political strife. So long as Eleora agrees to spare the lives of the Doneiks princes, Meraldia has no objections to your plan. The northern viceroys have already begun preparations to welcome Prince Woroy and Prince Ryuunie into our midst. It would seem all that's left for you to do is maneuver Eleora into becoming empress using politics. As the battles that require military might have ended, I'm hoping your next letter will be a merrier one.

The two main things Eleora needed to focus on now were absorbing the remnants of the old Doneiks faction, and decimating the power of Ashley's faction. I left both tasks in the princess' hands while I worked on getting Woroy and Ryuunie safely out of Rolmund and into Meraldia. I was also sending Ser Barnack with them. A few of the Doneiks family's staunchest supporters had also come to ask me for permission to move to Meraldia, but for now I decided to take just the princes. Any more people and it'd be difficult to guard them.

Most of the Doneiks family supporters had lost their land, which was why

they wanted to move to Meraldia and start over there. Most of them were accomplished soldiers and bureaucrats. They'd all received a first-rate education, and they were fiercely loyal to Woroy. Which was why once the princes were safely through, I was hoping to slowly smuggle those nobles into Meraldia as well.

Woroy, Ryuunie, and I boarded a carriage that would take us out of Creech Castle. Once the carriage was on its way, Woroy turned to me with a sardonic grin.

"So your plan is to shelter us in case you need to use us as political pawns in the future?"

I nodded to him while staring absently out the carriage window.

"That's right. Both Eleora and Ashley have what it takes to lead Rolmund, though. So I doubt I'll be forced to use you two any time soon."

Fortunately, Prince Ashley wasn't interested in colonizing Meraldia either. Only Prince Ivan and the previous emperor had been dead-set on that plan, and now both of them were dead. Whereas Woroy had become Meraldia's official guest. It was safe to say that Rolmund no longer posed a threat to Meraldia. I turned back to Woroy and said, "However, there's no telling what the empire's political landscape will look like in the future."

"True that..."

It was possible Prince Ashley might change his mind in the future, or have his hand forced by the belligerent nobles that made up his core support base. If that happened, I'd be able to use Woroy and Ryuunie as political pawns to throw Rolmund's government into chaos. Even though they'd been exiled, both of them were still extremely popular in North Rolmund. If I sent them at the head of an army to claim Rolmund's throne, it was likely they'd rise up in revolt again. Of course it was highly unlikely it'd come to that, but it still served as a good deterrent against any future meddling in Meraldia.

"You two, who possess the right to inherit the throne by birth, will serve as Meraldia's sword if necessary. Which is why I plan to treat you well once we reach Meraldia."

Even if they were officially no longer Rolmundian citizens, everyone knew they had the imperial blood running through their veins. Woroy's smile grew wry.

"You really are a villain."

"Please, you flatter me."

I felt more at ease being called a villain than a saint or a Champion. Woroy's smile grew more twisted.

"I take it that's the bullshit reasoning you used to convince your fellow countrymen to harbor us?"

Damn, he saw through me. Both the demon army and the Commonwealth granted me full authority to make whatever decisions I saw fit in Rolmund. But they had done so with the knowledge that I would act in Meraldia's best interests. Sympathy alone wasn't a good enough reason to save Woroy and Ryuunie. In truth, I would have preferred to feign their deaths and let them live out their days quietly in Meraldia. But if I'd done that, in the rare case that I needed to use them to keep Rolmund in check, the empire would just be able to claim that the real Woroy and Ryuunie were dead and that these two were fakes. So I'd reluctantly decided to make their exile a public matter.

"I don't run a charity, after all. Since I went to all the trouble of saving you, I expect you two to serve Meraldia's interests."

This time Woroy's grin was a happy one.

"Oh I'll be useful, don't you worry. But you better give me some land. I don't care if it's a tiny strip in the middle of nowhere, I just want land that's officially mine so I can start bringing the Doneiks family back to its former glory."

"Of course. I'll grant the Doneiks a reasonable plot of land. However..."

"However, what?"

It was my turn to grin now.

"There's absolutely nothing on the land I'm giving you, so you'll have to build everything up from scratch."

We traveled all the way to East Rolmund, to the tunnel that connected the empire to Meraldia. I was worried the Bolsheviks might send assassins after us, but our journey went smoothly. Honestly, it was kind of anticlimactic.

“There’s some bozos who’ve been following us around.”

“Yeah, they’ve been keeping an eye on our carriage from the forest.”

Vodd and Hamaam whispered to me as we made preparations to enter the tunnel. The people watching us were likely Bolshevik spies. Kite’s epoch magic revealed that there were barely a dozen of them, meaning they didn’t have the numbers to attack. And since they hadn’t sent over enough people for a raid, it meant assassinating Woroy and Ryuunie wasn’t their goal. But if they weren’t after the princes, I had no idea what they *were* after. Even as I pondered their motives, I walked up to Prince Ryuunie to give him some encouragement. The tunnel was rugged, and since it was too small for carriages to go through, we all had to make the trip on foot.

“I know it’s dark, and the footing’s treacherous, but this is the only way into Meraldia. Just bear with it for a little while longer, Ryuunie. We’re almost there.”

“Yes, sir!”

Good answer. Once we cleared the tunnel, the air around us grew warmer. We were finally back in Meraldia. The first thing I did was make sure our surroundings were safe. Once I was certain there were no enemies in the vicinity, I turned back to the two princes with a smile.

“Welcome to the Meraldian Commonwealth. As a Commonwealth Councilor, I formally welcome you to our humble nation.”

Woroy and Ryuunie ducked out of the tunnel and gazed at their surroundings with amazement.

“So this is Meraldia. It looks like spring is already almost here.”

As Woroy had commented, the weather here was closer to spring than it was in Rolmund. In fact, it was probably warm enough in the afternoons that the snow was beginning to melt. Still, Woroy was surprisingly unfazed despite the fact that he was stepping into unfamiliar territory for the first time. Ryuunie, on

the other hand, seemed adequately anxious.

“S-So this is Meraldia...the land where demons dwell...”

Incidentally, I'm a demon too, Ryuunie. If I told him that now he'd probably be overloaded with shock, so I decided to wait until he'd gotten a bit more used to things before divulging that little tidbit.

“Fear not, Ryuunie. The demons that live here follow human laws and mean no harm to humans.”

As the demon representative, I felt as though it was my duty to speak for them here. “Though they may look different from you, they too are Meraldians. They pay the same taxes and work the same jobs as other Meraldians. So there's no need to be scared of them.” Despite Ryuunie being just a child, he'd been taught how to govern since he was old enough to speak. He quickly realized that he was in no position to argue the point, and nodded.

“O-Okay.”

“Thank you.”

You two taught him well, Ivan, Lord Doneiks. While we talked, the soldiers of Krauhen that had been standing guard around the mine entrance quickly lined up and stood at attention.

“The Black Werewolf King has returned from Rolmund!”

“Raise your swords in salute, men!”

The soldiers simultaneously drew their blades and raised them into the air. Their synchronization was perfect. That being said, I did feel like this was a bit too exaggerated a welcome. Before I could say anything though, Belken—Krauhen's viceroy—ran over to me.

“Lord Veight, it's a relief to see you return to us safe and sound. And welcome, princes of the Doneiks family.”

To my surprise, the Demon Ambassador Airia was present as well.

“Welcome home, Lord Veight.”

“Lady Airia!? What are you doing here!?”

Her breath puffing in the cold, Airia smiled at me and replied, “When I heard you would be temporarily returning, I rushed over to greet you!”

“I’ll be back for good soon enough. You didn’t have to go out of your way to...”

Woroy loudly cleared his throat to interrupt me, “Veight. Isn’t Lady Airia your fiancée? There’s no need to act so formal just because we’re here! Go on, give her a kiss!”

Surprised, Airia turned to me.

“What?”

For a musclehead, Woroy sure had a sharp memory. I couldn’t believe he remembered I’d made that offhand remark. Not only that, he just *had* to mention that in front of Airia herself. Panicking, I quickly tried to right the situation.

“Uhh, let me explain,” I said. “The ladies in Rolmund started to spread rumors that I was gay because I kept refusing them, so I had no choice but to say I had a fiancée, and you were the only...”

I’d thought my little white lie would never get discovered, but now I was paying the price for it. *I shouldn’t have used that excuse.* Airia stared intently at me, her face beet red. But as far as my werewolf senses could detect, she wasn’t angry. *Thank God. Alright, this might be my only chance to set the record straight.*

“So basically, Lady Airia is most definitely not my fiancée. Isn’t that right, Lady Airia?”

Suddenly, Airia’s scent shifted. Now she *was* angry.

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Umm...Lady Airia?”

“I am most definitely not Lord Veight’s fiancée.”

She’s totally pissed, isn’t she? But why? As I tried to puzzle out Airia’s reaction, Woroy grinned at me.

“Oho, I see.”

He walked up to Airia and knelt before her.

“My name is Woroy Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund. I am the nephew of Bahazoff the Fourth, the late emperor of the Holy Rolmund Empire, and the second son of the Doneiks family.”

Woroy gave Airia a charming smile and added, “May I ask for your name, milady?”

“O-Of course.” Airia hurriedly turned to Woroy and curtsied. “I am a Commonwealth Councilor and the Viceroy of Ryunheit, Airia Lutt Aindorf. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Prince Woroy.”

“Having been defeated in battle, I have lost my status as prince. Feel free to simply call me Woroy, Lady Airia.”

He looked so dashing it was almost sickening. With his looks, he could probably make a living swindling rich noble ladies. *Oi, cut that out already. You’re wasting time. Get away from Airia.* I loudly cleared my throat and cut Woroy’s introduction short.

“You can talk later. Since you’ll be working for Meraldia, you’ll have opportunities to see her later if you want.”

“Heh, I suppose so.”

The hell are you grinning for? You want me to bite your face off, huh?

Just then, Airia noticed Ryuunie fidgeting awkwardly behind Woroy. As expected, he was anxious. Not only was he in an unfamiliar country, everyone here was a stranger to him. Sensing his unease, Airia smiled gently at the young prince.

“And you must be Ryuunie, right? I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Ryunheit’s Viceroy, Airia. But I am most definitely not Lord Veight’s fiancée.”

You don’t have to keep repeating yourself, you know. That aside, it seemed Airia’s lighthearted introduction had managed to reassure Ryuunie somewhat.

“I-It’s nice to meet you. My name is Ryuunie Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund. Lord

Veight has helped me a lot over these past few months, and I'm deeply grateful to him. I really like Lord Veight."

Ryuunie straightened his back and tried to look as grown-up as possible. Airia seemed moved by his display of maturity, and she smiled kindly.

"I heard you just recently lost your father. While I realize...it might be difficult for you to think of us as your new family, know that we are on your side."

Airia knelt down so that her face was level with Ryuunie's. Then, without warning, she hugged him.

"U-Umm!?"

Southern Meraldia was a lot more socially liberal than Japan had been, so hugging kids you met for the first time was pretty normal here. It probably helped that Airia and Ryuunie had basically the same social standing. But Airia's actions probably came as quite a shock to Ryuunie, who was used to the rigid social structures of Rolmund. Blushing, the young prince stiffened. While I watched the scene with a smile, Woroy coughed awkwardly and said, "Sorry, but Ryuunie is technically an adult according to Rolmund's customs."

That sentence alone was enough for Airia to grasp that Rolmund and Meraldia had very different customs when it came to physical contact. She hurriedly let go of Ryuunie and said, "My apologies, Ryuunie. I didn't mean to be rude."

"N-No, uhh..."

Fidgeting, Ryuunie dropped his gaze. *You know I can tell what you're thinking from your scent right?* It seemed Airia's hug helped Ryuunie relax. Chances were it reminded him of the times his mom used to hug him. Woroy seemed to have realized that as well, since he sighed and said, "Good for you, Ryuunie. Looks like you'll be able to make a lot of new friends here."

"Y-Yeah!"

Though his face was red to the tips of his ears, Ryuunie smiled. He'd been forced to mature way faster than any child should have, which was why he was still longing for parental warmth. Even if he was lawfully an adult, he was still a kid. Honestly, I was hoping he'd be able to grow up here in peace, without having to worry about politics.

Once the introductions were over, we walked over to the viceroy's manor to talk. I started off by explaining to Woroy that Eleora had actually lost to me, and that we'd formed a pact after that. Ryuunie seemed stunned by the revelation, but it seemed Woroy had half-suspected that was the case already.

"My brother and I figured you two had some kind of secret agreement that you weren't making public, but I never imagined you'd actually captured Eleora! No wonder she learned so much."

Why do you look so happy about that, Woroy? Before he could derail the conversation I went on to explain my plans for him.

"There's this unoccupied buffer zone that's a remnant from the time northern and southern Meraldia were at each other's throats."

The so-called Fetid Wastes. In truth the "wastes" weren't a wasteland at all, but rather a fertile region filled with untouched forests and plains.

"My goal is to build another city here and increase Meraldia's overall prosperity. But in order to build that city, I need to appoint a governor and gather workers."

That governor would need to be skilled too, since they'd be building up a city from nothing. Not only that, but they'd also need to know how to draw people to their city. No demon had that kind of leadership ability, and even among humans, there were few people fit for the job. All of the viceroys were busy with the affairs of their own cities, and I couldn't leave this project in the hands of someone inexperienced. I needed someone who had experience leading people already. Furthermore, they also had to be someone other Meraldians would approve of.

"I know I can trust you to do a good job building this new city, Woroy. You're someone who might have been emperor, had things played out differently. But despite your status, you don't stand on formality, so I know you'll get along with Meraldians just fine."

"Hang on now, I think you're overestimating me."

Woroy frowned in dissatisfaction. He really did think I was overestimating

him. Though personally, I thought that out of all the princes and princesses, he'd make the best emperor. Seeing that I wasn't going to budge on my stance, Woroy cleared his throat and grinned at me.

"But I gotta say, that sounds interesting. I'll have a chance to repeat the miracle our ancestors made when they first established Rolmund. Had I stayed in Rolmund as the second son of the Doneiks family, I wouldn't have ever gotten a chance like this."

I guess that's one way to look at it. Woroy sure was optimistic. He got to his feet and swept his gaze across me and the viceroys.

"You can count on me. I don't need honor or status, just a job worth doing."

"Err, I'm still going to need to make you a viceroy. Which means you'll be sitting on the Commonwealth Council as well."

Considering how short a history the council had, it wasn't all that prestigious a title, but I still wanted to give the former prince something. *I'm not gonna let your legacy end as some commoner.* In order to make sure he didn't try to refuse the title of viceroy, I sighed and added, "Sheesh, you really lack ambition, you know that? But if you don't want to ask for anything, that just makes it harder to ask for favors."

Woroy sighed even louder in response, "Oi, you're the last person I wanna hear that from."

"I was born a commoner, so my current position is already more than enough. If I ask for any more wealth or status, I'll be overstepping my bounds."

Woroy gave me an incredulous look.

"Do you seriously believe that?"

"I do."

For some reason, my reply caused not just Woroy, but also Airia, Belken, Kite, and even Lacy to sigh.

"Why must you be like this, Lord Veight..." Airia muttered.

"Your lack of self-awareness really is a problem," Belken added.

“If it wasn’t for this habit of yours, you’d be a perfect boss,” Kite said.

“You’re even denser than I am...” Lacy said with a shake of her head.

Why are you guys all acting like I said something bad? It was because everyone kept pushing me to take on more prestigious posts that I had to work so hard. After all, authority came with responsibility. *Man, I miss the days when I was just a regular vice-commander. I worked really hard this time around, so someone please reward me by demoting me...* Honestly, the weight of all this responsibility and expectation was too much.

During the meeting, I took the opportunity to order Kite and Lacy to return home.

“You two stay in Ryunheit with Woroy. Help familiarize him with Meraldian customs and dialects.”

The moment I said that, both of them frowned.

“But Veight, your mission in Rolmund isn’t over yet, is it? I thought you needed us.”

“Exactly! I can even make my illusions breathe fire now!”

You really don’t have to. Besides, it wasn’t like illusory fire would actually be hot. I smiled wryly and replied, “I appreciate the sentiment, and you two really have been a huge help, but you’re both exhausted, aren’t you?”

Not only had they been forced to spend winter in an unfamiliar land, but I’d had them fight with me at the front lines. Though Kite and Lacy had courage and determination in spades, they weren’t soldiers. Even if they had ten times the mental fortitude of normal people, all this fighting had worn them out.

“I’ve still got Mao and Parker with me in Rolmund. Both of them are used to fighting so I’ll have them pick up the slack for me.”

“I get what you’re saying, but...”

Kite and Lacy shot me worried looks, but honestly, I was more worried about them. I needed them rested for the challenges we’d no doubt face in the future. Suddenly, Airia interrupted our conversation by muttering, “If possible, I would

like to accompany you...”

“You’re Ryunheit’s viceroy! Please don’t add to my list of VIPs I need to guard.”

Why does everyone want to go to that frozen wasteland of a country?

I had the feeling if I tarried any longer I’d end up returning to Rolmund with more people than I’d left with, so I decided to leave as soon as possible. To be honest, I’d actually been planning on returning to Rolmund the very same day, but Belken insisted that I stay at least one night, so I took him up on his offer. As expected, Belken held a banquet that evening in honor of me and my werewolves.

“Meraldia’s food is so damn good!”

“Rolmund’s food wasn’t half-bad though!”

The Garney brothers were wolfing down huge chunks of pork. Personally, I didn’t think the taste of grilled pork differed that much by region. The older werewolves grinned as they watched the Garney brothers stuff themselves. Though werewolves were practically invincible in their wolf form, the harsh climate of Rolmund had still taken a toll on everyone. We’d have to go back into that frozen hellscape soon enough, but everyone could relax for tonight at least.

I sat down next to Belken and started eating my fill as well. I did have to admit, the salt poured over the meat definitely made it taste better. Rock salt was nature’s ultimate seasoning. *I remember reading something back in Japan about how the minerals in salt are naturally designed to...nevermind, I forget.* Either way, I could see why southern Meraladians wanted to import rock salt rather than use sea salt. As I was marveling at the wonders of salt, Lacy staggered drunkenly over to me, a beer mug cradled in her hands.

“Veeeeeeeeight! Wanna drink!?”

“No thanks.”

I didn’t particularly dislike alcohol, nor was I a lightweight, but I didn’t want to drink when I had work waiting for me tomorrow.

“Well, I’m drinkin’!”

Yeah, I can tell. Lacy downed her mug, then beamed at me.

“Veight!”

“What is it?”

I stiffened up as I noticed the angry look in Lacy’s eyes.

“You’re waaay toooo dense, you know that!? I mean it! Oooh, I said something great just there!”

No doubt in Lacy’s drunken mind she was enthusiastically applauding herself. I never knew she was such a belligerent drunk. I looked over to Kite for salvation, but he pointedly ignored me, opting to continue slowly sipping on his glass of grape juice. He clearly didn’t want to get involved. *Some vice-commander you turned out to be.* Emboldened by the liquor, Lacy continued lecturing me.

“Do you have annnnny idea how delicate and...sensible? Sensitive? Sennnsitive! Delicate and sensitive girls’ hearts are!?”

Her language faculties were already starting to leave her. At this point, I was so worried about her that I wasn’t really paying attention to what she was saying.

“Between Airiaaaaaa annnd...who was the other one again?”

How would I know?

“Anyway, who do you like more?”

How am I supposed to answer when I don’t know who she’s being compared to? Lacy looked at me, cross-eyed, waiting impatiently for my answer. Just then, Kite came over. Like me, he was perfectly sober.

“Lacy, I think that’s enough. You’re bothering Veight.”

“Huh? U-Umm, Kite...”

“Let’s just stop here.”

As Kite dragged Lacy away, I noticed her drunkenness seemed to have suddenly vanished. From the looks of it, she was just a little tipsy at best.

Meaning she'd pretended to be dead drunk to try and lure me into answering whatever question she didn't manage to fully ask. *I don't understand girls' hearts? Well, I'm not a girl, so...* As I was contemplating Lacy's words, Woroy walked over to me.

"Do you have a minute, Veight?"

"Yeah."

I had just been thinking I needed to have a discussion with Woroy, so this was good timing.

The two of us left the dining hall and walked to the manor's balcony. Though snow still covered Krauchen, the weather was much milder than in Rolmund. Woroy looked down at the city below and muttered, "This is a nice country."

"What did I tell you?"

Granted, I was glad that a foreign prince was taken with Meraldia. After all that had happened here, I'd come to quite like the place myself. Woroy leaned over the balcony railing while I found a nearby pillar to rest my back against.

"I can tell there's a lot you want to ask. Where should I start?"

With his back still facing me, Woroy shrugged.

"You're a werewolf, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

The moment I dueled Viscount Schmevinsky, I was certain the Doneiks family had opened up an investigation into me. While I knew they hadn't been able to gather any conclusive evidence, Woroy and Ivan had probably guessed the truth. I was almost certain Woroy had only refrained from asking until now out of consideration for me.

"Sorry for keeping it hidden until now. I probably could have just told you."

"Nah, it's no big deal. Don't worry about it." Woroy turned to me and sipped his goblet. "Did you know? There are rumors that surviving demon clans are still around in Rolmund. Supposedly they're living in hiding."

“First I’ve heard of that.”

“From what I’ve heard, the Sternenfeuer cult is hiding them. Though I don’t know the full details myself.”

Sternenfeuer cult? That was an unfamiliar name. Woroy saw the confusion on my face and added, “Sternenfeuer is the pagan religion indigenous to North Rolmund. But after multiple crusades and an era of persecution by the Sonnenlicht Order, they’ve gone underground. Public records claim they don’t exist, and even I don’t know what their numbers are.”

Interesting... The Sonnenlicht Order’s tenets existed to unify people under a single system of values, which is why it was such an influential religion. But because of how much Sonnenlicht believers valued unity, they were extremely intolerant of other religions. Meanwhile the Mondstrahl Church approved of diversity, and it had dozens of different sects, some of which could hardly even be called Mondstrahl. While the sects rarely fought with themselves, the church itself wasn’t very united.

I wonder what kind of religion Sternenfeuer is. Woroy didn’t seem too knowledgeable about their theology, so I’d need to do some investigating of my own.

“So, Veight. If you’re a werewolf, what do you believe in?”

“Uhh, I’m not that religious. Most demons worship the Demon Lord, but I don’t really...”

I trailed off, lapsing into thought.

“On second thought, I might have worshiped the previous Demon Lord after all. The current Demon Lord is my magic master, so while I respect her I wouldn’t necessarily say I worship her.”

Woroy peered into my face for a few seconds, then grinned.

“Even though you barely blink when we’re talking about women, your expression totally changed when you mentioned the previous Demon Lord. You must have really loved them, huh?”

“Well... Yeah, I guess so.”

The old demon lord had been a fellow reincarnator, and an all-around amazing man. But why was Woroy bringing up women?

“What does this have to do with women though?”

Woroy’s expression grew serious and he asked with a straight face, “Are you sure you’re not gay?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not?”

“Then what kind of woman’s your type?”

“Well...”

I’d never really thought about it. Woroy gave me an exasperated look.

“It’s a noble’s duty to make heirs and raise them up to be wise rulers who can inherit your position. So stop acting so coy all the time.”

“You might be right, but I really don’t have the time to think about love right now.”

Ensuring Meraldia’s stability took priority. My job was to protect all the husbands and wives and couples living in Meraldia; I didn’t need a romance of my own. But Woroy just sighed.

“Stop talking like my brother. After his wife died, he became exactly like you are now.” Woroy downed the remaining alcohol in his goblet and wiped his mouth. “Maybe I’m sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong, but I really think you should pay more attention to the ladies in your life.”

“I get what you’re saying, but...”

Thanks to my work, I’d made a lot of acquaintances, many of whom were young women. And all of those young women were quite kind to me. There had been times where I wondered if I might actually be quite popular with girls. But I’d thought something similar in a previous life and been burned horribly for it, so I was proceeding more carefully this time. My last experience had been so traumatic that I broke out in a cold sweat just thinking about it.

Besides, I was a werewolf. I didn’t even know if it was okay for werewolves to marry humans in this world. Granted I wasn’t sure I wanted to marry a werewolf either. Regular werewolves were attracted to other werewolves even

in their transformed forms.

Take Fahn for example. All the other guys in my village claimed she looked absolutely stunning when she transformed. But if you asked me, Fahn just looked overwhelmingly powerful in her werewolf form. I lacked the aesthetic values and bloodlust all the other werewolves possessed. In a werewolf wedding, the newlyweds went on a grand hunt together with their family and friends. And it was customary for the husband and wife to consummate their bond by biting a large boar or deer to death together. *I could really do without that.*

As a human in a werewolf body, I was a pretty unique case. Especially since I'd retained all my memories of Japan. Everything about me was out of the norm. *Hell, even I don't know what I should be thinking of myself as. Like what exactly is "Veight?"* Of course, I wouldn't be able to figure that out just by sitting here and agonizing about it. Which was why I was hoping to slowly discover who exactly I was through my work.

"Until I can sort myself out, I don't want to think about building relationships with other people."

I frowned to myself, and Woroy cocked his head inquisitively.

"It seems you've got more on your mind than you let on."

Damn, are all Doneiks psychic or something? I nodded and replied, "Yeah, I don't have anyone I can talk to about them either, which sucks."

Woroy nodded in understanding. To my surprise, he didn't say "You can always confide in me."

"I've got my own worries that I can't share with anyone. If I ever reach the point that I can, that'll mean I've finally grown as a man."

I see. But man, I never expected you of all people to have stuff weighing on your mind. Now I'm curious what's bothering you so much. Seeing my expression, Woroy grinned.

"Oh no, you're not getting any answers out of me. Not until you tell me your secret, at least."

Figures. Woroy scratched his head awkwardly and added, “To be honest, it’s a pretty serious issue, at least to me. When I’m finally ready to talk about it, you’ll be the first person I come to.”

His vague hints were only feeding my curiosity, but still I nodded in acceptance.

The next morning I gathered my werewolves and prepared to depart. But just before we left, I heard voices coming from our luggage.

“Oi, get out you fucks. I’m the only help he needs.”

“No way. We wanna go see Rommund too!”

“I thought it was pronounced Rolund?”

“It’s Domund, you moron.”

You’re the one getting it the most wrong. The other werewolves smelled the stowaways in our luggage as well, and they grinned at each other.

“Hey, boss?” Monza licked her lips with relish, a wicked smile on her face. “We don’t really need that box, so how about we burn it?”

Suddenly everyone inside the crate fell silent. *Damn Monza, you’re brutal. Well, I guess you are a werewolf.* That being said, so was I.

“Yeah,” I grinned. “Better to burn empty boxes in case assassins or something try to stow away inside our luggage.”

“Heh. I’ll go get the torch.”

Suddenly, a lagomorphus and four canines tumbled out of the wooden box. I was amazed they’d all managed to squeeze in there. The lagomorphus was my fellow disciple, the artificer Ryucco. He nervously glanced around, then patted the snow off his pants and cleared his throat.

“Yo, Veight.”

“Yo.” I walked over and squatted down as low as I could to meet his eyes. “What’re you doing?”

Ryucco scratched his head and stamped the ground a few times.

“Well, I was thinking of doing maintenance on your Blast Rifles for you.”

“Oho.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and the lagomorphus straightened up to his full height.

“Look, Parker alone just ain’t gonna be enough. You gotta take more of your disciple friends with you. Domund’s full of magic tools, ain’t it? You need me, don’t you?”

It’s Rolmund. Though his tsundere attitude was endearing, Ryucco also had a very good point. Kite and Lacy had been immensely helpful, but they were exhausted. I couldn’t bring them with me any longer. Parker was of course reliable as well, but his epoch magic and illusion magic couldn’t hold a candle to the two experts. He could cover some of those deficiencies with his expert necromancy, but only up to a point. As I debated whether or not to bring him, Ryucco sniffed excitedly.

“There’s tons of magical goodies to see over there, right? You’ve gotta take me. Not only can I repair anything you need, but I’ll also be able to steal all of their tech. Plus I’m tiny so I don’t stand out.”

“Well...you’ve got a point.”

He was small enough that he could hide in luggage, and if need be he could just disguise himself as an oversized rabbit.

“Alright, you can come.”

“Well, if you *insist*, I guess I can help you out!”

“Actually, hang on a second.” I suddenly remembered something important. “Did you ask Master for permission to come?”

Ryucco suddenly buried his head in the snow-covered grass and started making bunny noises.

“Oi, don’t think you can play dumb. Did you ask— Hm?”

Suddenly I picked up a human’s scent coming from one of the other boxes. It was a very familiar scent, too.

“Master?”

The box shook. *You’ve gotta be kidding me.*

“What are you doing, Master? Err, I mean, Demon Lord.”

The box shook again. *Oh, give me a break. You’re the commander of the demon army, the ostensible ruler of Meraldia, and the second generation Demon Lord. You can’t just go around hiding in boxes.*

“Please come out of there, Demon Lord. We need to talk.”

“I-I am nothing more than a passing eddy of mana...”

“No, you’re the Demon Lord.”

If there was anyone else in the world with that much mana I’d probably have a heart attack.

The Demon Lord Gomoviroa sat down on a rug the canines provided for her and smiled awkwardly at me.

“You see, I was worried about my beloved disciple, so...”

“I appreciate your concern, but...”

I pulled a face, but if I was being honest about myself I was actually happy Master was so worried about me. She really was soft when it came to her disciples. It turned out my hunch had been correct, too. Master had sent that huge snowstorm my way after Mitty had divined my plight and informed her of it. She’d created huge quantities of steam by using her new powers and sent that massive cloud of steam across the northern mountains to turn it into clouds. The previous Demon Lord had taught her that was how precipitation worked, so she’d known what to do. *I can’t thank you enough for saving my ass back there.* But while I was grateful, I still had a responsibility to fulfill. As much as I would have liked to avail myself of Master’s kindness, I couldn’t.

“Great Demon Lord. Leave this matter in the hands of your underlings. As our ruler, it is your responsibility to watch over the people of Meraldia.”

Master looked up at me with a wistful smile.

“You’ve grown, Veight.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Master.”

Blushing, I scratched my cheek. Though if I was this happy she was willing to take over my work for me, I clearly had a long way to go still. I bowed to Master, then turned to the others who’d be staying behind.

“Lord Belken, I’ll be counting on you to keep the tunnel secure.”

“Leave it to me... And make sure you keep Lady Eleora safe out there.”

Belken bowed to me, looking every bit like the serious, no-nonsense military man he was.

“As for Eleora, don’t worry. She’s well on her way to becoming the most influential person in the empire. And of course, I intend to continue supporting her.”

I then turned to Kite and Lacy.

“Things’ll definitely be harder without you two, but I can’t have you dying on me. So rest up and shoot the breeze with Woroy for a while. I’ll have need of your services again later.”

Kite and Lacy looked reluctant to let me go, but they nevertheless nodded.

“You better not replace me while I’m gone, Veight. I’m the only vice-commander you need.”

“Yeah, Veight. Kite was bragging to us so much when you promoted him to vice-commander. Don’t take that away from him.”

“Do you *have* to ruin every moment with unnecessary comments!?”

Did he really? Vice-commander of a vice-commander isn’t that fancy a post you know... While I was idly thinking that, Kite rounded on Lacy and started chewing her out. I smiled to myself as I watched the two of them bicker amicably, then turned to Woroy.

“Enjoy Meraldia while I’m gone, Woroy. I’m honored I was able to introduce the place to you.”

Woroy grinned back at me and replied, “Don’t worry, I’m planning on touring

all the cities. I can't wait to create a harem of southern beauties for myself."

"Well you'll definitely be popular with the people here. Especially with that friendly personality of yours."

At the very least, I could totally see him getting along with Garsh and Petore. Woroy both had the charisma and the ability to lead, so I was confident he'd do a good job. After saying my goodbyes to him I squatted down in front of Ryuunie.

"Ryuunie. I know it's gonna be tough living in a new country, but you can always come to your uncle or Ser Barnack or Meraldia's viceroys for help."

"Okay, I will!"

Despite how uneasy he no doubt was, Ryuunie nevertheless answered with all the dignity of a prince. Next, I turned to the canines who'd tried to sneak their way into Rolmund with me.

"Sorry, but I can't take you guys."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

"But you said it was okay for Ryucco to come!"

"Oh, yeah! We finished the sewage system for Ryunheit that you told us to make! See, here's the report! Praise us!"

I asked you guys to make that like the day after I conquered Ryunheit. What the heck have you guys been doing this whole time if it took you this long? It seemed to me that the easiest way to offload these canines would be to introduce them to Ryuunie.

"See, Ryuunie. These are demons too. They're as harmless as they come, so try to get along with them."

He'd been glancing curiously at them the whole time, and the moment I directly introduced them to him his eyes started to sparkle.

"Wow, they're so cute! Can I hug them, Veight!?"

"Yeah, sure. Canines love being hugged."

Ryuunie excitedly ran over to the canines and hugged them.

“Whoa, they’re so warm and fluffy!”

“Yep, yep.”

Fufufu. Good, soon you’ll be infatuated with demons. And now I had a new mission to give the canines.

“You guys stay in Meraldia and serve Ryuunie as his pages. If you do a good job, I’ll treat you all to sheep ribs.”

“Really!?”

“We’ll do it!”

The canines started wagging their tails excitedly, all thoughts of going to Rolmund forgotten. They didn’t care what they were doing, as long as they were having fun, and they were clearly enjoying the attention Ryuunie was giving them. But despite how whimsical canines were, I had the feeling they were actually the strongest of the demons.

Woroy and Ryuunie would have Kite and Lacy to guide them around Meraldia, so they’d probably enjoy their tour of the cities. And since they had Ser Barnack to guard them, there was no need to worry about bandits. Add the canines to their party and they seemed more like a traveling merchant caravan than an exiled prince’s party.

Once I finished my goodbyes to everyone else, I finally turned to Airia.

“Lady Airia.”

“Yes?”

Airia smiled at me.

“I plan to wrap everything up by spring, but things may take longer than I would like.”

“Don’t worry, you can leave Meraldia’s affairs to me.”

Airia looked so reliable that I was half-tempted to just leave everything in her hands. But I knew she had more than enough on her plate already. Not only did she have to take care of Ryunheit’s affairs, she’d also been appointed by the

Council to take care of all negotiations with northern Meraldia. And of course she was still the demon army's official Demon Ambassador. I needed to finish my business in Rolmund quickly, so I could come back and help her.

"I'll return as soon as I can. So don't push yourself too hard in my absence."

"I won't."

Airia smiled again. No matter how much work was tiring her out, she never let it show on her face. She really was a born leader. I wracked my brain, trying to think of something nice to say in farewell. I wanted to make it back by early summer at the latest. *Oh yeah, Meraldia celebrates the summer solstice, don't they? I can just talk about that.*

"Let's spend this year's summer solstice together. I can't promise I'll be back in time for it, but I'll do my best to."

"O-Okay." Airia looked momentarily taken aback, but then her smile returned in full force. "I'll be looking forward to it. If you fail to keep your word, can I ask for another favor in return?"

"Yeah, anything you want."

I mentally breathed a sigh of relief. That seemed to have lifted Airia's spirits. Ever since Ryunheit had declared its independence, I'd been saved by Airia dozens of times. The least I could do was try and make her happy.

"Well, it's time I departed, Lady Airia. Take care of your health while... Hm?"

I suddenly noticed Woroy grinning at me. *If you've got something to say, just say it.* Feeling oddly embarrassed, I drew my cloak around myself and turned around. *On second thought, working away from home might be better.*

"Werewolf squad, move out!"

"Aye aye!"

Why the hell are all of you grinning too?

—Lacy's Homecoming—

I peek inside the entrance of my family's shop. Though I spot my brother-in-law sitting at the counter, I don't see my older sister anywhere.

"Well if it isn't Lacy. What're you doing here?"

"Wha!?"

Turns out my older sister's standing right behind me. My family runs a preserved food store out of their home. Most of what they sell is vegetables pickled in Krauchen's famous rock salt. I remember Veight said he really liked the vegetables when he tried them. He said they reminded them of home. But Veight's from the south, so how come northern food reminds him of home?

"Hey, Lacy. You're spacing out again, aren't you?"

My sister starts smacking me on the head and I hurriedly raise my hands to protect myself. If all this cranial abuse makes me any stupider I won't be able to do my job.

"Stop that! Oh, yeah, that reminds me."

"Mhmm?"

"...What was I gonna say again?"

"How would I know?" my sister shot back as she gets up from her chair.

"If you're this scatterbrained, I bet you're no help to the demon army either. I can't believe someone like you got a letter of recommendation from Belken to attend the magic academy..."

"I'm doing great at my job!"

I really am! I think... Hmmm... Actually, I might just be doing okay at my job? Seeing my expression, my sister sighs.

"Don't worry your new bosses too much. You might be a genius when it comes to magic, but you're a moron when it comes to everything else."

"I am not!"

I puff my cheeks out angrily at my sister, who just pats my head.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a big girl. Ah, looks like we’ve got a customer. I’ll talk to you later.”

As my sister headed to the front of the store, I heard a familiar voice.

“Oh no, I can manage perfectly fine by myself, thank you.”

“Movi!”

It looked like Master had gotten overwhelmed upon entering the store and was loitering around the entrance. Even though she’s the Demon Lord, Movi’s a really shy person.

“What kind of nickname is...Movi?”

I puff my chest out proudly and introduce my master to my sister.

“This is my magic master, Movi—err, I mean Gomoviroa! She’s also the Demon Lord!”

“This little girl is the Demon Lord?”

My sister’s eyes go wide. Movi looks like a kid, so I can’t say I’m surprised by her reaction. But my sister takes the revelation in stride, and after nodding for a few seconds, she introduces herself to Movi.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Demon Lord. I’m Lacy’s older sister, Wechka. I run this store together with my husband.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Wechka. As my disciple stated earlier, I am Gomoviroa.”

My sister curtsies with a smile and replies, “Thank you for looking after my little sister, Your Majesty.”

“Think nothing of it. Lacy is quite a superb illusionist. So superb, in fact, that I have little left to teach her. She already understands the qualities a mage needs most. I am proud to have such a splendid disciple.”

By “qualities a mage needs most” is Movi referring to her lessons on how mages should embrace solitude and value tranquility? Or, put in less flowery terms, “mages shouldn’t be sad that they’re eating their meals alone?” Well, that’s not important right now. I turn to my sister and ask, “How come you

believed me right away when I said Movi's the Demon Lord, sis?"

She smiles confidently at me.

"Because I know you wouldn't lie about something like that."

Wow, she actually has faith in me. That makes me kinda happy. But then my sister sighs again.

"That being said, I really wish you could be more clear in your letters. I'm not as smart as you, so stop writing all this cryptic stuff that makes no sense."

Just then, I hear a commotion from the store's entrance.

"This way, Master Woroy. Master Ryuunie, are you still following along?"

"Ah, yes! I'm sorry, I won't get lost this time!"

"I've never seen a pickling method like this before, Barnack. Let's go ask the shopkeeper if we can sample their wares."

"Allow me to test for poison before you eat anything, Master Woroy."

"I wonder if they have any salted meat? I guess not, huh?"

"Man, I really wanna eat salted meat now."

Wow, they're really noisy. My sister and her husband hurriedly run over to greet the party that walks in.

"Lacy, who're these guys?"

My brother-in-law turns to me after bowing to the customers. I once again puff my chest out and say, "That's the Rolmund Empire's Prince Woroy and his nephew Prince Ryuunie! And that old man is their bodyguard, the Sword Saint Ser Barnack!"

Now this'll definitely surprise Sis!

"Huh? Really? Wait...are you serious?"

"Yep! Prince Woroy's come here to help build a new city in Meraldia!"

As I say that, Prince Woroy bows to my sister.

"I am Woroy Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund. Though here my rank is something akin to an Honorary Count."

“Oh, I uhh...”

“My apologies for the sudden visit. But when I heard this was Lacy’s family’s home, I knew I had to come see it.”

My sister’s totally shocked to see a prince acting so polite toward her. Oh yeah.

“Ah, and that’s one of my coworkers from back when we were in the Senate, Kite. He’s really good with epoch magic and he’s Veight’s vice-commander. Also, he can’t hold his liquor at all. Like he gets drunk even faster than your husband.”

“You didn’t have to mention that last bit!” Kite yells angrily at me.

“Oh and these are some canines who work for the demon army...”

“I’m Pan!”

“I’m Paka!”

“And I’m Paan!”

“Together we make up the Panpakapaan trio!”

One of them didn’t give his real name, but it was part of their comedy skit so it was fine. Besides, it seems canines don’t really care that much about names. My sister and her husband hurriedly greet everyone, but it looks like they’re still confused.

“What the heck is your job in the demon army, Lacy? I know you said in your last letter that you were going to Rolmund for work, but...”

My sister’s husband gives me a puzzled look. I puff my chest out for the third time and say, “Right now I’m Prince Woroy’s guide!”

I’m the cool, mysterious, beautiful illusionist who serves as the imperial prince’s royal guard! Together with my partner in crime, Kite, I’ll use the magic the Demon Lord taught me to save him from all kinds of danger...I hope. Man, I’m so cool.

“Lacy, you’re drooling.”

Kite pokes my back, and I hurriedly wipe my mouth with my sleeve. I need to

be more careful. Whenever I get too excited I start drooling. Which is probably why everyone says I look stupid all the time. Just then, Belken walks in, flanked by a brace of guards.

“Your Highness, you can’t just wander off by yourself. Please take some guards with you whenever you go into the city.”

“Don’t worry, Lord Belken. Krauhen’s a safe city. Everyone’s kind, and the streets are neatly laid out so it’s difficult to get lost.”

“But didn’t Ryuunie just—”

Before I can finish my sentence, Kite stomps on my boot.

“Lacy, do you think we could sample some of your store’s food?”

“Oh, yes, sure! Sis, can you get some samples out for Prince Woroy?”

Whoops, that was close. Thanks for the save, Kite. No wonder Veight trusts you to be his vice-commander.

“These vegetables aren’t just pickled in salt, are they? I can tell you’ve added some other spices to them too,” Mister Barnack muttered as he chewed on a sample.

“Yeah, these vegetables are really rich, too. I bet you won’t find anything that tastes quite like this anywhere else. I think I like this better than the taste of Rolmund’s pickled food,” Woroy replied, working his way through his own sample plate. Their plates are piled so high you can’t really call them “sample” plates anymore, but I guess it’s fine. My sister’ll be able to advertise that the prince ate at her shop, which’ll make business boom more than ever. Her husband walks back into the room with a smile on his face, carrying a tray of yet more samples.

“Krauhen’s Mine Pickles are made by stuffing vegetables into salted barrels and letting them sit in abandoned mineshafts. Each mineshaft has a different kind of air quality, so if you pickle your vegetables in a different shaft you’ll get a different taste. Our shop’s been using the same mine shaft for over a century now.”

I remember my dad lecturing us about that all the time when he was still

alive. My sister's husband sure had it tough, learning under him. While I'm reminiscing, my sister slides over to me and whispers, "When did you become so famous? I always thought you were a weird kid, but I'm glad your weirdness ended up getting you powerful friends."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"I'll let you decide."

Grinning, my sister pats my head again. But you know, if Veight hadn't saved me that day, I never would have ended up in this situation. Either the demon army would have killed me when everyone still thought I was Mildine, or the ruse would have been discovered and I would have been executed by my fellow Meraldians. So I couldn't really call these my accomplishments. Blushing, I replied, "The Demon Lord's vice-commander is a really nice guy. It's thanks to him that I have all this, not me."

"Wow, it's rare for you to be so humble."

"Oh, I kind of have to be humble these days, or..."

Or I'll just look silly compared to Veight. Even though he does way more amazing things, he doesn't brag about any of them. You better come back safe and sound, Veight. I really like working with you.

Halfway through the tunnel to Rolmund, I turned around. *I wonder what Woroy and Lacy and the others are up to right now? I hope they're resting.* The giant crate of pickled vegetables Lacy had given me was quite heavy. As were the thick pajamas Master had given me, and the stacks of documents Kite had left for me.

I rifled through my pockets and pulled out a letter. It was a letter from Airia; one she'd passed to me directly. Though it was just a single piece of paper, it was as heavy as the rest of my gifts. All of them were laden with the feelings of their senders. So long as I had these gifts, I was confident I could survive anything. Noticing I'd slowed down a little, Ryucco turned back to me.

“Yo, what’s wrong? Feeling sick? Or are you worried about the guys we left behind?”

“Nah, I’m fine.” I smiled at the rabbit and pointed to the tunnel’s exit. “Come on. I need to show you around the empire.”

It’s time for my final mission in Rolmund.

The Blizzard Lord

The assassin collapsed onto the snowy ground, his head split in two. A short distance away, another assassin lay face-up in the snow, a throwing knife sticking out of his throat. There were no other enemies nearby. The young man wiped the blood off his sword and soundlessly returned it to his sheath. His name was Barnack. He came from a family of disgraced knights who'd had their lands seized, and just the other day he'd entered service into the Doneiks family.

"The battle's over, Milord."

Barnack turned to the middle-aged noble walking toward him. He was the younger brother of the emperor, Lord Doneiks. Though he was a masterful politician, he'd allowed his mediocre brother to take the throne. Because of that, there were many rumors that he was the real power behind the empire. And as a result, he had many enemies. Lord Doneiks brushed the snow off his coat and looked down at the assassins lying at Barnack's feet.

"Who sent them?"

"I do not know. They were carrying nothing that might identify them."

Barnack was a master of any weapon one could name, but he was not an investigator. After making sure the two men were well and truly dead, Lord Doneiks started rifling through their clothes.

"They're wearing North Rolmund outfits, but they haven't put them on right. If you wrap your scarf like this, snow can get in from the cracks and freeze your neck. Besides, anyone who has metal hilts for their weapons is asking to get frostbite this far north."

"That certainly is unnatural."

Barnack kept a wary eye on his surroundings even as he turned toward his master. Lord Doneiks smiled at him, his breath misting in front of him.

"A half-assed disguise provides more evidence than no disguise at all."

Whoever these men were, they didn't want their identities known. Meaning they cannot have brought many allies with them."

Lord Doneiks picked a bow off the ground and tested its string. He then examined the arrows in the quiver.

"This is a good bow. But it lacks the power to fell large game like giant deer."

Giant deer only inhabited the frigid fringes of North Rolmund. They had thick pelts, thicker fat, and were larger than horses. In order to hunt one, it was necessary to use a massive longbow, or a very powerful crossbow. However, the assassin's bow was not that large.

"This is a warbow. More suited to sniping people than animals," Barnack said.

"Indeed. So while the enemy took great pains to disguise themselves, they didn't disguise their bows. Or perhaps they couldn't. Because they were unused to using North Rolmund's bows. Meaning these men were not hunters, but soldiers."

Lord Doneiks dropped the bow onto the ground and covered it with snow.

"Hide the bodies and their equipment, Barnack. Then turn your cloak inside-out."

"Yes, Milord."

The dead were returned to the snow, while the living were covered by the white undersides of their cloaks. Both the living and the dead blended into the white background, disappearing from view.

The calendar of the Holy Rolmund Empire had a season known as fullwinter. It was the few coldest months in the year, and also the season where men of Rolmund proved their might by hunting large game. Because of the cold, it was the season with the least amount of animals to hunt, and the season that food was needed the most. So men competed to see how much meat they could bag to prove their worth. Nobles were no exception, either. But the game nobles hunted was much bigger. Giant deer were the most valuable prize one could bag during the fullwinter hunting season.

Lord Doneiks had been invited on a hunt by his cousin, Lord Kinitoff. It was there, at his hunting grounds, that Lord Doneiks had been attacked by assassins. Though his loyal retainer Barnack had barely managed to fend them off, the two of them were isolated deep in the forest.

“Kinitoff’s always been a simple man.” Lord Doneiks smiled sadly as he walked through the snow. “He actually thinks such slipshod tactics will be enough to prevent him from being exposed.”

“I realize Master Kinitoff is your main political rival, but I never imagined he’d attempt something as reckless as assassination.”

“Indeed. But the problem with fools is they’re unpredictable.”

“If only I’d predicted this sooner, I would have assigned more guards to you.”

Barnack kept a wary eye to his rear as he spoke with his master. Lord Doneiks smiled at him and replied, “No need to apologize. It’s precisely because I predicted this that I brought only you along to guard me, Barnack.”

Surprised, Barnack turned back to his master.

“Why would you do something so dangerous?”

Lord Doneiks wiped the snow off his cap and accelerated his pace.

“If I brought too many guards along with me, Kinitoff would grow wary. My foolish cousin is obsessed with the crown. I have no doubt he’ll eventually bare his fangs at my brother.” He turned back to look at Barnack. “It would be dangerous if he struck at a time in the future when my position is less secure. Which is why I purposely showed an opening to lure him into striking now.”

“That’s far too dangerous, Milord! The only guard you brought along was me, someone who’s barely been in your service for a few days!”

At that, Lord Doneiks guffawed.

“That’s rich, coming from you. But you are correct. However, the only way I could be sure Kinitoff would strike was if I brought only a single, recently-employed guard. Regardless of whether or not that lone guard was the renowned Sword Saint Ser Barnack.”

“I’m no Sword Saint. I’m just an inexperienced soldier.”

“How many ‘inexperienced soldiers’ could weave their way between the attacks of two snipers—on uneven, snowy footing no less—and take them down with just a sword?”

“The sword style I studied under, the Sashimael style, has produced exemplary swordsmen like Draulight. Compared to him, my arrow-cutting and knife-throwing skills are a far cry from the true Sword Saint.”

“In that case, I’m looking forward to the day you show me the skills of a true Sword Saint.”

Lord Doneiks smiled happily and resumed marching through the snow.

The two of them managed to escape their surviving pursuers and reach the center of the hunting grounds. Unlike the maintained areas around Kinitoff’s castle, these woods were full of dangerous creatures like wolves and bears.

“Milord, are you sure you want to go this way? I can’t protect you all by myself. We need to rendezvous with your other guards.”

There were around 20 of Lord Doneiks’ guards waiting at the cabin near the entrance of the hunting grounds. All of them were veteran fighters. But Lord Doneiks sat down on a nearby boulder and shook his head.

“That’s what Kinitoff’s expecting us to do. I have no doubt that he’s set up a large-scale ambush somewhere along the path back to the cabin.”

“Perhaps so, but this deep into the mountains we’ll be killed by beasts and the cold before the assassins even find us.”

Barnack was a master of fighting, but he was hardly an outdoorsman. Lord Doneiks pulled a map out of his pocket and pointed a few spots out to Barnack in the dimming light.

“From here, we’ll cross the mountains. My army’s waiting on standby for me beyond them. Officially they’re just returning from a routine drill, but they know we’re coming.”

“Beyond the mountains!?”

Barnack gazed up at the towering, jet-black spires jutting out of the earth in the distance.

“That’s impossible! The route’s long enough that we’d have to camp in the wild. And in this weather, camping in the open with our equipment will mean death!”

“Indeed. This season is not one suited to camping out.” Lord Doneiks chewed on a piece of jerky and took a swig from his canteen. “Which is precisely why Kinitoff won’t expect us to take this route.”

“But...”

Even if Milord is doing this to outmaneuver Lord Kinitoff, this is just suicidal. But as much as Barnack wanted to tell his master that, he could tell from Lord Doneiks’ expression that he wouldn’t be deterred. The lord offered Barnack some dried meat and his canteen.

“Sounds fun, don’t you think?”

“Not in the slightest.” Flustered, the young knight still gratefully took the meat and water. “But a few days ago, you saved my life and my honor. So now it is my turn to protect your life and your honor, Milord.”

Though he doubted the practicality of this idea, Barnack nevertheless found himself intrigued. Protecting his master from an unknown score of enemies, the cold bite of fullwinter, and vicious beasts was the most worthwhile mission he could ask for. Even if it was normally too much for a single retainer to accomplish.

“I must admit, if a situation like this does not get your blood boiling, you aren’t a true knight.”

“Exactly, see? The reason I initially saved your life was because I saw in you the mettle of a true knight. And I don’t just mean your skill with the sword.”

Lord Doneiks’ looked as calm and unshakable as always. Seeing his master’s confidence, Barnack began to calm down as well. *As if I’ll perish here!* As Barnack steeled himself, he suddenly felt very excited to tackle this challenge. *On second thought, this does sound a little fun.* The young knight took a swing from the canteen as well.

Lord Doneiks and Barnack began trekking through the snowy mountains. As they walked, Lord Doneiks told Barnack a story.

“According to history, the slave swordsman Draulight crossed the southern mountains in fullwinter during his escape. Not only that, but he led a huge party of malnourished slaves with him. Almost none of them died, and the survivors established a country called Meraldia far to the south.”

“I’ve heard.”

“What’s important is that his story proves crossing the mountains in fullwinter is possible. And these northern mountains are barely more than hills compared to the southern peaks. We should be able to manage.”

“You may be right there.”

Barnack was running out of energy to argue back with his far too eager master. Realizing his bodyguard was no longer contradicting him, Doneiks continued.

“I’ve gathered as many documents as I can in my quest to discover how Draulight did what he did. And to my surprise, I’ve found that he actually left behind a manual detailing how to escape for the slaves he left behind. I’ve read through the entirety of this manual in case a situation like this ever happened.”

“How long ago was that?”

“I discovered the manual in my teens. But it took many more years to determine the veracity of the manual. Now though, I can tell you for a fact every word in it is true. Draulight had been a fearsome man. Just where had he come from, though?”

While Lord Doneiks’ curiosity had been piqued by Draulight’s tale, the real reason he’d put so much time into researching it was because of his prudence and foresight. Normally the emperor’s younger brother wouldn’t even consider the possibility that they’d have to imitate Draulight’s feat. But Lord Doneiks had prepared for any and every eventuality. His caution was so excessive that to Barnack, it was almost terrifying. The young knight watched as his master powered his way up the mountain slope.

“I had always thought mountain climbing was a skill that required more brawn than brain, but after reading Draulight’s manual I realized that knowledge is essential to survival. Knowing how to read a mountain’s geography, being able to predict the weather, and knowing what breathing techniques to use and what clothes to bring can make all the difference.”

A sudden realization hit Barnack.

“Does that mean the reason you gave me that underwear yesterday was because...”

“Precisely. The reason I gave you wool underwear was because I expected we’d be marching through the mountains today. Cotton and cloth get easily soaked by snow and sweat, making them unsuited for the cold. But wool is different. Even when wet, it helps retain warmth.”

“Unbelievable...”

As Barnack marveled at his master’s foresight, Lord Doneiks continued his explanation.

“The food you bring with you is vital as well.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well you see, you need bread, sweets, water, and fat to keep your strength up. Here, have some of this.”

Lord Doneiks offered Barnack a sugar cube. Sugar cubes were made from refined sugar beets cultivated in East Rolmund, and were highly expensive.

“Are you sure I can have this?”

“If you don’t eat it, your body won’t last. Even the Sword Saint can’t help me if he’s too weak to move, right?”

“Thank you for your generosity.”

Still half-doubting that a mere sugar cube would give him much energy, Barnack bit down on it. The sweetness spread across his tongue, and he suddenly felt a jolt of energy run through him. Next, Lord Doneiks pulled out a small, wrapped parcel.

“Eat this next.”

“What’s this?”

“Lard. I swiped it from the kitchens earlier. Sweets and fat are the two best foods to take with you on a long mountain climb. They’re highly nourishing, even in small quantities.”

“I see...”

“Salt is important as well, so I seasoned the lard with it. That’ll also make it easier to stomach.”

“Is that so?”

Barnack pulled a face as he stuffed himself full of salted lard. The seasoning didn’t make it all that much more palatable. Lard was the kind of thing you spread lightly on bread, not ate plain.

“Milord, do you have any more sugar? I think I need a palate cleanser.”

“You bet I do. Make sure you eat all of it.”

Barnack silently sighed, wondering what he’d gotten himself into.

Meanwhile, Lord Kinitoff was panicking.

“You can’t find him!? Are you sure he hasn’t tried to return here!?”

“Yes, sir. However, we did find the corpses of two of our assassins buried in the snow.”

“Who cares about that!? Hurry up and off that bastard Zweinei already!”

“Yes, sir!”

The scouts lost their opportunity to explain to their lord the significance of the corpses they’d found, and were forced to bow and leave. Lord Kinitoff looked back at the Doneiks manor. Twenty of Lord Doneiks’ best guards had been protecting it. They’d fought to the death for their master, and Lord Kinitoff was forced to bring an army of 100 to finally subjugate the manor. And of the 100 he’d brought with him, 40 died in the fierce fighting inside it. His losses were staggering.

“With how hard they fought, I was sure he was holing up inside the manor, but... Goddamnit, where did you go!?”

Though Lord Doneiks’ guards had all died, they’d succeeded in wasting Lord Kinitoff’s time, and slowing his pursuit. Lord Kinitoff glanced about wildly, holding his sword in a white-knuckle grip.

“That man is dangerous... We can’t afford to give him any time. If we don’t end him quickly, he’ll be the one baring his fangs at *us*! Hurry! Comb every inch of the hunting grounds if you have to!”

Around that time, Lord Doneiks was busy building with snow.

“What do you think? I tried to model it in the old republic style.”

“Is that so?”

Lord Doneiks packed in the last brick of snow into his snow hut. It was so small that the two men could barely fit inside it.

“Originally their snow huts had entrance halls and staircases, but we don’t have time for that so I kept it simple. I can’t make it any bigger either, or the cold will sneak in through the gaps.”

“Milord, the sun will set soon.”

“Then I guess I finished just in time. You keep watch outside, Barnack. I’ll prepare our dinner.”

“Dinner!?”

Barnack couldn’t tell if his lord had nerves of steel, or was just a fool. He stroked his sheath and sighed to himself.

“Milord, I cannot fathom what it is you’re attempting to do.”

“Food and rest are important enough that they’re worth risking our pursuers catching up to us. That’s all there is to it.”

After a few attempts, Lord Doneiks succeeded in starting a fire inside their hut. Barnack did his best to block as much light from the fire as possible, and looked up at the hut’s ceiling.

“If we’re attacked here, even I won’t be able to save us.”

“Don’t worry, the only thing nearby is snow. And this little castle of ours is made of snow too. You can’t even spot it from a distance. Besides, there’s going to be a blizzard tonight. Not even hunting dogs will be able to find our scent in that.”

“Are you sure there’ll be a blizzard?”

“In my time studying strategy, I also learned how to read mountain weather. I can guarantee you that there’ll be a fierce blizzard tonight. More importantly, the snow in our cups has finally melted. Drink up while the water’s still hot.”

Barnack sighed sadly as he picked up the cup of water Lord Doneiks had melted with a lit candle.

“I was wondering what the fire was for... But why melt the snow when we can just eat it as is?”

Lord Doneiks shook his head, his expression serious.

“No matter what happens, don’t do that. If you let the core of your body grow cold, you’re done for.”

“I see...”

A certain percentage of Rolmund’s serfs were exempted from military service, so there was no need for nobles to wait for after the harvest to start wars, since there’d still be enough serfs left to grow crops. Winter campaigns were harsh, so most battles took place in the time from spring to fall. Furthermore, by fighting wars during the planting season, generals could strategically target their enemies’ farms and starve their opponent out through the winter.

All of this meant that Barnack, like most other nobles, was unused to spending the winters outdoors. In fact, the only people who were used to it were hunters who specialized in fullwinter hunts. Which was why Barnack found it odd that Lord Doneiks was so knowledgeable about winter camping.

“You really know everything, don’t you Milord?”

“If there’s something my enemies know that I don’t, that puts me at a fatal disadvantage. So I’ve made it my goal to learn as much as possible. That’s all

there is to it.”

Lord Doneiks sounded neither proud nor embarrassed of his stance. He spoke of it as if it were just a matter of fact.

“Now then, let’s sleep while we can. The snow’s already started coming down outside.”

“How do you...”

Barnack parted the cloak they’d used as a tent flap to look outside and saw that the wind was indeed beginning to pick up. On top of that, small snowflakes were beginning to fall to the ground.

“This is definitely going to become a blizzard,” Barnack muttered.

“Yep. Anyone wandering around outside right now will definitely freeze to death. Assuming our pursuers aren’t morons, they’ll wait for the blizzard to stop before continuing the chase.”

“But what if they manage to reach us anyway?”

Lord Doneiks rolled over and replied merrily, “Then you and I will die here. But the empire will persevere.”

Barnack’s jaw dropped open in shock, but his fearless master had already fallen asleep and was breathing deeply. *This is one hell of a noble I’ve sworn my services to.*

The next morning, Barnack awoke before the sun rose.

“You up?”

“Yes, Milord.”

Before he could even work through his surprise that Lord Doneiks had awoken before him, the lord handed Barnack a lump of lard and a sugar cube, as well as some meltwater.

“The blizzard’s stopped. And the sun will rise soon. Our pursuers will catch up before long.”

“Then let us be away as soon as possible. We should be able to scale the

mountain today.”

Barnack quickly washed the sugar and lard down with a glass of water. However, Lord Doneiks slowly shook his head.

“If there are any pursuers still on our trail, then they’re masters of their craft. If they’re just average trackers, then they’ll have given up and told Kinitoff that I probably died in the blizzard.”

True, if I was our pursuers I would have thought we couldn’t have survived that blizzard either. As Lord Doneiks belted on his sword he added, “If we reach my army with our pursuers hot on our heels, they’ll know I have a force here and we’ll lose the element of surprise.”

“So what should we do then?”

Lord Doneiks smiled thinly.

“We take care of the fun part all by ourselves. You’re fit to fight, right?”

“As a warrior, I am always ready to fight no matter the situation.”

Barnack patted his prized sword and puffed his chest out. To his surprise, he found he was enjoying this almost as much as Lord Doneiks.

The trackers silently pursued their quarry in the predawn light. Though they’d lost two of their number, they still had ten men left. Each of those ten men were veteran assassins who’d survived hundreds of battles, too. They’d brought with them two hunting dogs. They moved forward in one long horizontal line, constantly signaling to each other as they scoured every inch of the mountain slope.

“The only way Lord Doneiks could have survived that massive blizzard last night was by finding a place to hole up.”

“Indeed. And there are few places on this mountain suitable to lay camp. If it were you, which spot would you choose?”

One of the trackers pointed to a boulder jutting out from a nearby cliff.

“There. There’s a deep snowdrift there which is perfect for making a snow hut out of. And unlike other boulders, this one’s sturdy enough that there’s no need

to fear avalanches.”

“For once I agree with you on something. Alright, let’s check that spot out first.”

“Sure.”

The assassins split into two groups to pincer the boulder. They approached cautiously, using the surrounding forest for cover. But before they even reached the boulder one of the assassins shouted, “Beware, crossbow!”

Everyone dropped to the ground, and a moment later there was a loud thud as something embedded itself in one of the trees. A second later, the assassins spotted movement near the boulder.

“That’s a deer-felling crossbow. Look, it’s got way more power than normal.”

The assassin pointed to the thick arrow lodged deep inside the tree trunk. A crossbow needed enough power to nearly bore through a tree if it wanted to deal any significant damage to a giant deer.

“This is gonna be tough.”

“Yeah. The wind’s blowing down from the mountain, too. Our shortbows are a lot less powerful than theirs too.”

The assassins had chosen their bows for their portability, high rate of fire, and ease of use. Unfortunately, that backfired on them here.

“But there’s nowhere around that boulder for us to hide. What should we do?”

“There’s only one thing *to* do. Overwhelm them with our numbers.”

The assassin who spoke tossed his bow to the ground and drew his sword.

“There’s two of them, and ten of us. Not only that, but crossbows take time to reload. Even if the enemy hits every shot they take, half of us will still be able to reach the boulder.”

The assassin’s leader, an older man with white in his hair stroked his beard and replied, “I’ve heard the knight protecting Lord Doneiks, Barnack, is even more skilled than we are. However, Lord Doneiks himself is not a warrior. If we

ignore Barnack and focus solely on Lord Doneiks, we should be able to complete our mission, even if it costs all of us our lives.”

The assassin’s comrades nodded in agreement. In order to relay his orders to the other group that was out of sight, the assassin took out a deer whistle. It blew notes similar to that of a female deer’s cry, and originally it was meant to be used to lure male deer in for the hunt. But the assassins also used the whistles to communicate. The assassin leader gave the order to charge.

“Go!”

The assassins shed their food packs and heavy coats as they ran, lightening their burdens. But just then, they heard a faint metallic scraping from the depths of the forest behind them. It was the sound of a sword hitting a sword. There was only one thing this could mean.

“Barnack’s circled around behind us! He must be fighting Granf’s squad!”

“There’s no point in helping him! Keep running!”

“In fact, this will make it even easier for us to take down Lord Doneiks!”

The assassins decided to let their comrades deal with Barnack while they continued sprinting up the slope.

“Wai—”

Someone tried to shout out a warning, but then thudded to the ground. The remaining assassins reflexively turned around and saw— “Barnack!”

“What!?”

Lord Doneiks’ sole guard, Barnack, was standing behind them. Except he should have been fighting with the assassin’s comrades in another part of the forest. Had he somehow managed to kill the four assassins in the other group and make it all the way here in so short a time?

“I-Impossible!”

Barnack dashed up the mountain slope, then leapt off the trunk of a nearby tree. He sailed through the dawn air with his sword drawn, and when he landed one of the assassins had lost their head. Blood spurted from their decapitated trunk, dyeing the snow crimson.

“Is this guy even human!?” the surprised leader of the assassins shouted.

“Hage and I will take care of him! The rest of you keep running!”

“Aye!”

Of the remaining four assassins, the older two turned to face Barnack while the younger two continued running up the slope. Though the older assassins had no hope of keeping up with the younger ones when it came to speed, their swords were much deadlier. For once, Barnack hesitated to charge. Instead he watched the two men warily, waiting for an opening.

“I see, so you’re the Sword Saint Ser Barnack. To think you would fare so well even against Lord Kinitoff’s elite assassins.”

Barnack kept his sword raised and didn’t answer the assassin leader. His weapon was covered in blood and gristle, both of which were quickly starting to freeze in the dawn chill. There was no doubt that his sword’s edge had been dulled thanks to his previous fights. The other assassin slowly closed in on Barnack and said, “Even the famed lightning cuts of the Sashimael style can’t strike in two places at once, can they?”

He was trying to buy time by provoking Barnack into an unwise rush. Normally, warriors didn’t speak to their opponents. Barnack had already figured out the assassin’s intentions, and thus didn’t rise to the taunts. He steadied his breathing and gauged the distance between him and his enemies.

“You really are an impressive warrior. It’s a shame we have to kill you.”

“Yeah, it really is...”

The assassins’ grinned at Barnack, and he smiled faintly back at them. That served as the signal to start, and all three men swung their swords at once. The clang of metal against metal echoed through the dim forest, but the sounds didn’t last long. The two assassins had already lost. One had been slain instantly, while the leader had suffered a fatal cut to the chest. Barnack had dashed with all his might toward the weaker of the two assassins, and slain him in less than a second. From there he’d been able to force the leader into a one-on-one situation, whom he’d defeated with a well-placed thrust.

“I don’t believe it... You’re as strong as those werewolves they talk about in

legends...”

As the assassin leader fell to his knees, he smiled fearlessly. Blood dripping from his lips, he muttered, “But despite your strength, were you able to save your master?”

As he slumped to the ground, the assassin watched Barnack wordlessly run up toward the boulder.

“Milord!”

Upon reaching the boulder, Barnack found Lord Doneiks standing silently in the snow. Two assassins lay on the ground, blood pooling underneath them.

“Did...you do this, Milord!?”

“That I did, Barnack.”

Lord Doneiks casually wiped the blood from his sword and offered a brief prayer for the two dead assassins.

“It’s a shame to lose young talent like these two. Had they been my subordinates, I would never have let them die like this.”

“More importantly, Milord, how were you able to defeat two assassins of this caliber on your own...”

“It wasn’t hard. I just lured them closer, then shot the faster one down with my crossbow.” Lord Doneiks’ white breath puffed out in front of him as he spoke in panting gasps. “Because they weren’t in sync, I was able to take them on one by one. The second one had needed to exert himself to keep up with the first, so he was out of breath by the time he reached me. That dulled his movements enough for me to beat him.”

Even if the assassin had been out of breath, only a first-rate warrior would have been able to defeat someone of his caliber. Noticing Barnack’s questioning gaze, Lord Doneiks sheathed his sword and quietly muttered, “It’s quite helpful to pretend as though I don’t know how to use a blade.”

“Really?”

“Really. I only stood a chance because my opponents underestimated me.

And even then, I wouldn't have survived if there had been a third."

"I see."

It certainly was true that the assassins had lost because they'd underestimated their foe. Barnack could tell just from the way they'd died. One had been cut diagonally down, while the other had a crossbow bolt in his back.

"I see you are not only an excellent swordsman, but also an excellent archer, Milord."

Lord Doneiks fell silent for a moment, then smiled wanly at Barnack.

"Kinitoff taught me how to shoot when I was young. At this very hunting ground, in fact."

"Is that so?" Realizing the atmosphere had grown awkward, Barnack quickly tried to change the subject. "Regardless, this plan was still far too dangerous. Had I run away, or died in battle, what would you have done?"

"I accurately judged your loyalty and martial skill, and you rewarded the trust placed in you. The two of us are still alive right now because of that. That's all there is to it."

"I can't believe..."

Barnack was nonplussed. *If you're going to put that much faith in me, how could I possibly betray you? I wouldn't be a knight if I did.*

"Milord."

"Yes?"

"The next time you plan to do something this reckless, make sure you take me with you. Am I understood?"

"But of course."

Master and servant looked into each other's eyes, then broke down laughing.

"Alright, now it's time for our counterattack. I know my brother hates to see his relatives fight amongst each other, but I'm sure he'll see why I have to do this now. It's time we met up with my army and buried this accursed place under the snow."

“Yes, sir.”

The next evening, Lord Kinitoff’s body was discovered on a mountain far from his hunting grounds. Imperial records claim that he got lost while hunting and was killed by a wild bear.

Dear Veight,

You left for Rolmund on an autumn breeze, and a frigid winter came to Rynheit. But now, a gentle spring is finally on its way. I sincerely hope that now that your war has ended, the first rays of spring have blessed you as well.

I'm certain that a long winter campaign in such a northern empire has left you exhausted. In truth, I wish I could call you back and send someone else to complete your mission in your place. But I know no one except you is capable of completing such a difficult task. The other councilors and even the other generals of the demon army deeply lament their own powerlessness.

Despite all of the lofty titles we give ourselves, in the end we always rely on you to complete the most difficult jobs. And yet, you never once complain. In fact, you always say things like, "Because I'm a werewolf I can do more reckless things than you humans," or "Anyone could do this, I'm just the one who happened to be chosen for the job." I'm too inexperienced to say for sure whether others really could achieve what you have, or if you're just being overly humble, but the fact remains that we are always putting you in the most danger. I'm eternally grateful that a demon like yourself would be willing to risk your life over and over for the sake of us Meraldians. Truly, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

As I was writing this letter, I heard that you would be making a brief return visit to Meraldia. Knowing you, I'm certain you'll return with the same smile on your face that you departed with. But I also know that you're too much of a worrywart to take the time to come all the way to Rynheit. You'll want to return to your mission as soon as possible. I've decided to hold back my desire to meet you for now, and will entrust this letter to a courier. But please, at least for the brief time that you're in Meraldia, forget about your mission and relax. I will be praying for your safety and success from Rynheit.

*PS: On second thought, I think I will come north to meet you. I simply can't sit still knowing you're returning. I hope you won't be too surprised.

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's been a while. It's me, Hyougetsu.

I imagine it'll be summer when this book hits the shelves, but in the world of Der Werwolf, it's midwinter. When I was writing the story on Narou, I tried my best to match the seasons in the story with the seasons we were having in real life, but that's a lot harder to do for a print publication.

That aside, Nishi(E)da-sensei did an amazing job with the illustrations this time too. Thank you very much for all your hard work, Nishi(E)da-sensei. The front cover features Woroy, who's Veight's main rival this volume, and his nephew Ryuunie. Both of them are going to remain pretty relevant from here on out too.

Incidentally, I told Nishi(E)da-sensei at the end of last volume that this volume was gonna be mostly about a bunch of old dudes, so he really went all out on the old man depictions. I guess this volume turned into one hell of a sausage fest. But well, I'm an old fart myself so I'm quite fond of old farts. It's nice that they got to be in the spotlight for once. Though it's not like they're my fetish or anything. At least not as far as I know. At any rate, it was probably inevitable that this was going to turn into a bunch of old men duking it out the moment I decided to have a civil war set inside a feudal empire. Like, that's the most old man topic you can have. Especially since Rolmund's an old empire with a ton of conservative traditions. It's hard to give women active roles in a society like that.

Moving on, I'm sure you've all heard about the Der Werwolf manga that's being drawn by Terada Isaza-sensei. But what you might not have heard is that the first volume of the origin arc has just gone on sale! This one's being drawn by Kosumi Yuuichi-sensei. In fact, it went on sale the same month this volume came out! Man, what a coincidence! Or well, not a coincidence since I worked hard to match the months up. Anyway, the two manga have different feels to them. Terada Isaza-sensei's art is a lot more serious, while Kosumi Yuuichi-

sensei has a much gentler style. But since Der Werwolf's about a gentle guy living in a serious world, I feel like both manga capture different sides of the series perfectly. There's also going to be tiny short stories of mine attached to every one of the manga volumes as a bonus (It's pretty tough to write them so I dunno how long I'll be able to keep it up, but I'll try to have them going for as long as possible.)

Oh, I might as well give you a preview of the next volume here too. Now that Veight's mopped up the Doneiks family and brought the remnants of their faction into his fold, he's finally going to have a showdown with Prince Ashley. Who will rule the empire in the end!? And will Meraldia ever know peace!? If you found that summary stimulating, the whole story's on Narou so you can read ahead there if you want. In fact, I just finished the main Der Werwolf story on Narou the other day. Hopefully by the time this volume actually goes on sale I'll have finished all the after stories too.

Lastly, it's time for some acknowledgments. For starters, I'm thankful to my wonderful editor, Saitou-sama. He's the one who's always cheering me up when I'm down, and giving me the encouragement I need to finish these books. He's like the guardian deity that makes sure Der Werwolf's on schedule. I'm also grateful to my assistant editor Itagaki-sama for all the wonderful advice he's given me. It's all thanks to him that this book made it to publication. So really, thank you so much. An editor's job is surprisingly tough, so I'm always grateful to the editing department for all they do for me. Also, thank you to all the readers who leave encouraging comments on my Narou page or tweet about the series. You have no idea how grateful I am to all of you guys. It's all thanks to everyone's support that I'm here right now, so I'll do my best to repay your kindness by getting the next volume out as soon as I can. See you all again in volume seven.



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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 6

by Hyougetsu

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